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First Things First

Essays on the Buddhist Path

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Honest to Goodness

"Let an observant person come—one who is not fraudulent, not deceitful, one of an honest nature. I instruct him. I teach him the Dhamma. Practicing as instructed, he in no long time knows for himself, sees for himself: 'So this is how there is the right liberation from bondage, i.e., the bondage of ignorance.'" — MN 80

When I was a young monk in Thailand, I knew a woman whose father had been the chief musician for the royal Thai court in the early years of the 20th century. The family was never wealthy, but they lived in the palace compound, and that was where she was born. That was also where, as a child, she learned how to cook. By the time I knew her, her palace years were over, but she still had a reputation as an excellent cook. Many women asked to study cooking with her, but as far as I knew, she taught only three or four. Time and again, she told me, she had to reject potential students on grounds of character. One was "too flighty." Another, "too proud."

Part of her attitude reflected the fact that she refused to accept money to teach, so she was free to take on only the students she felt like teaching. But a more important part of her attitude, as she explained it to me, was respect for the skills she had been taught: They deserved to be passed on only to those who were reliable enough to maintain them, and observant enough to pick up their subtleties and to apply them to the vagaries of time and place —what kind of food was available, what kind of people would be eating the food.

As I became more familiar with traditional Thai culture, I found that her attitudes were shared by many people who had mastered the old skills. Instead of teaching students at large, they would take on apprentices, accepting only the apprentices they felt were worthy of their skills. This attitude applied not only to the skills of lay life, but also—as I found in my relationship with my teacher, Ajaan Fuang—to those of monastic life. Ajaan Fuang was passing on the skills he had learned from his teacher, Ajaan Lee, and my position was that of an apprentice who had to make himself worthy of those skills. Looking into the texts, I found that this attitude stretched all the way back to the time of the Buddha. The Dhamma he taught was a skill

(vijjā): the skill for ending suffering. Any student who wanted to learn needed clearly-defined character traits to qualify as an apprentice in that skill.

This perspective is rarely appreciated in Western Buddhist circles. That's because most of us in the West gain our first exposure to Buddhism in a denatured setting: in a classroom, on-line, or in a meditation retreat. We learn the teachings as a body of concepts, and meditation as a series of techniques for seeing the truth of those concepts. Rarely, though, are we taught that either the teachings or the meditation involve qualities of the character. Even when we're taught the social emotions of goodwill or compassion on a retreat, they're usually presented as an expression of our innate good nature, with very little notion that strengths of character—such as self-honesty or restraint—might be needed to embody them.

This is in sharp contrast to the way the Buddha himself recommended that people encounter the teachings: in the context of a relationship with a person who embodied admirable character traits, and who wanted you to develop those traits as well. The fact that the Buddha described this relationship as an apprenticeship meant that the teacher had to look for admirable potentials in a prospective student, and the student had to look for similar traits in a prospective teacher, before each side agreed to take the other on.

While this sort of relationship was modeled on the apprenticeships of other skills—such as carpentry or goldsmithing—it wasn't simply a relic of ancient Indian traditions. Instead, it grew out of the nature of the skill that the Buddha taught and trained his students to teach. Training in this skill required more than just memorizing a body of concepts or mastering meditation techniques. It also required such qualities as honesty, harmlessness, and restraint—qualities that were best transmitted through close personal contact, from one real person to another.

We can see this in the Buddha's descriptions of how a person might get started on the path to mastering the skill to end suffering. As he said, everyone's first reaction to suffering is twofold: bewilderment as to why it's happening, and a search for someone who might know how to end it. Because of our bewilderment, our search for someone to end this suffering can often lead us astray, as we look for help from all the wrong people. That's the negative side of the search. But its positive side is that it opens

our mind to outside help. This way, when we find the right person who really knows how to put an end to suffering, we can be responsive to that person's positive influence.

One of the most distinctive features of the Dhamma is that it points to the source of suffering inside. In other words, we suffer because of our own actions, and we'll be able to end suffering only when we can change the way we act. To be willing to take on such a teaching—rather than one that blames our suffering on things or people outside, or that promises that someone outside can end our suffering for us—we need at least a glimmer of two qualities of the character. We have to be (1) observant enough and (2) honest enough to admit that, yes, we do suffer from our own actions, and that we'll have to clean up our own act if we want the suffering to stop.

These two qualities—being observant and honest (or "no deceiver," in the Buddha's words)—were precisely the qualities the Buddha looked for in a student. But they weren't merely signs that the student was ready for the training. They also served as the qualities that the student had to use reciprocally, in order to judge whether a particular person was reliable enough to take on as a teacher. After all, as the Buddha also said, you don't want to associate with people lacking in integrity, and you can't know whether another person has integrity unless you have some integrity yourself.

The Canon contains many lists of qualities that a teacher should embody, but two stand out. In the first list (MN 95), you look for honesty and harmlessness. To check for honesty, the Buddha has you observe whether the teacher shows any signs of the greed, aversion, or delusion that would cause him to claim knowledge of things he didn't really know. To check for harmlessness, you observe whether the teacher ever tries to get other people to do things that would lead to their long-term harm or suffering. Only when a teacher passes both tests should you place your confidence in him.

The second list comes in the Buddha's description of how to develop admirable friendship—which, he says, is the most important external factor conducive to awakening (AN 8:54). Admirable friendship means both having an admirable friend—a really wise, good person—and trying to emulate that friend's good qualities. And the qualities the Buddha recommends looking for are four.

The first good quality is conviction in the Buddha's awakening—

believing that the Buddha really did put an end to suffering, that he did it through his own efforts, and that he did it through qualities that were not peculiar to him. They're qualities that we all have, at least in potential form, simply that he developed them to a very heightened degree. But we can do that, too. What that means is that an admirable friend is one who's convinced in the power of his or her actions, in the power of the mind to change itself in a way that can lead to a reliable happiness, just like the happiness the Buddha found in his awakening.

The second quality is virtue. You want to look for someone who sticks to the precepts and encourages other people to stick to them, too. This second quality follows naturally on the first, because anyone who really believes in the power of action wouldn't want to harm any being at all. This means no killing, stealing, illicit sex, lying, or taking intoxicants. In any situations. At all. As the Buddha says, if you can hold to these precepts without exception, you're giving universal protection to all beings. If you make exceptions, that protection is only partial—and you're only partially protected as well.

The third good quality is generosity. Admirable friends give freely not only of their material belongings, but also of their time, knowledge, energy, and forgiveness.

The fourth good quality is discernment: insight into how suffering arises and passes away, with the primary focus on how suffering is caused by mental actions that can be abandoned by training the mind.

So when you're looking for a teacher, you have to be responsible to find someone who embodies these qualities. This will take time, along with all your powers of observation. And you have to be honest in your judgment. You can't turn a blind eye to a potential teacher's breaches of virtue, pretending that they don't matter. Otherwise, you'll develop the attitude that your breaches won't matter, either.

Once you're convinced that you've found the right person, you have to be observant to pick up his or her good qualities. Not every Dhamma lesson is in words. As Ajaan Fuang once said, a good student has to learn to think like a thief. You can't wait to be told where the valuables are. You have to figure out how to find them yourself.

You also have to bring honesty to the relationship, paying careful attention to the teachings and then weighing them against your own actions to see where your actions do and don't measure up.

In this way, your honesty and your powers of observation get turned in both directions—toward your teacher's actions to pick up good examples to emulate, and toward your own actions as you try to improve them in line with the teacher's example. As these two qualities get developed in this way, they turn into a quality that the Buddha called "appropriate attention."

Just as admirable friendship is the most important external factor in the practice, appropriate attention is the most important internal one. "Attention," in the Buddha's vocabulary, is a matter of which questions you take to heart—the ones you pay attention to and focus on trying to answer. He never taught "bare" attention, as there are no bare questions. However, there are appropriate questions—appropriate for helping to bring suffering to an end—and inappropriate questions, which focus on issues that pull you off the path.

Inappropriate attention focuses on questions such as "Is the world eternal? Is it not? Who am I? What am I? Do I exist? Do I not exist?" These questions get you tied up in what the Buddha calls a "thicket of views," from which it's hard to disentangle yourself. To insist on answering them is like being shot with an arrow and refusing to get it removed until you've found out who shot the arrow or how the arrow was made. You'd die.

With appropriate attention, though, the questions come down to: "What is skillful and what's not skillful? What, when I do it, will lead to long-term welfare and happiness? What, when I do it, will lead to long-term harm and suffering?" As you pursue these questions, you realize that the answers don't stop with words. They lead to actions. And they force you to develop your powers of observation and honesty even further.

The Buddha's instructions to his son, Rāhula, show how to do this in the context of an admirable friendship.

As the Buddha told Rāhula, before you act, ask yourself, "What do you expect to be the results of your actions?" If you foresee that an action is going to cause suffering or harm, don't do it. If you don't foresee any harm, you can go ahead and do it. But look at it also while you're doing it to see if any harmful results are coming up in spite of your original intention. If you see any harm arising, just stop. If you don't see any harm, you can continue.

When you're done, though, you're not really done. You have to look at the action's long-term results. If you realize that you did harm even though you didn't expect to, you go over and talk with your admirable friend, both

to develop your honesty in being willing to admit mistakes, and to gain advice from your friend on how to apply your powers of observation to be more harmless the next time around.

Here is where all these basic qualities of character come together. You're paying appropriate attention to your actions, trying to be honest and observant to make sure that you're not causing any unnecessary harm. And you're depending on the help of a reliable person to force you to be even more honest and observant—to the point where, when you look at your actions and don't see any harm at all, you can trust what you see, because you've been trained to be reliable. You can take joy in the fact that you're making progress, and that joy gives you the energy to keep pursuing the training to higher and higher levels, ferreting out more and more subtle ways in which your actions need to be fine-tuned.

Because this framework of appropriate attention starts with questions about intentions, it gradually moves its focus from actions in general to something more specific: Which intentions lead to suffering, and which to the end of suffering? These are the questions that underlie the four noble truths: suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. And here again, the focus of your attention is on what you're doing—and what you need to do better. Suffering isn't simply something you passively endure. It's an activity, the activity of clinging, in which the mind feeds off the things to which it clings. Its cause is also something you're doing: You crave either to fantasize about sensual pleasures, to take on an identity in a particular world of experience, or to see your identity in a world of experience destroyed. The cessation of suffering requires that you develop dispassion both for clinging and these forms of craving. The path requires that you develop the qualities of mind that lead toward that dispassion.

This is a tall order, because you'll have to abandon many of the activities you've taken as food for the mind, thinking that the pleasures they gave were worth whatever pain they involved. Now, however, honesty requires you to admit that they're not, and so you have to give them up. And this is where you realize that the principle of harmlessness is not just inoffensive meekness. It requires strength: the strength of restraint, the strength of consistency, the strength of determination, the strength of really being true to yourself, the ability to sacrifice immediate pleasure for long-term good.

This is why this skill can be taught only by people of strong character,

and can be mastered only by people who have the integrity to realize that character is a quality they need to develop. And this is why the Buddha recommended that the Dhamma be taught in the context of an apprenticeship, where qualities of character are emphasized so that they can prosper and grow into something solid and true. But that's one of the signs of the Dhamma's true goodness. It can be mastered only by people who are truly good.

But what can you do if you can't find an admirable friend to gain this sort of training? There's one passage in the Canon that, at first glance, sounds discouraging: the one where the Buddha says that admirable friendship is the whole of the practice, or the whole of what he calls the holy life (SN 45:8). By that he means that without him as our admirable friend, we'd be nowhere. We'd have no idea of how to put our sufferings to an end.

But there's another passage (Sn 1:3) where he says that if you can't find an admirable friend, it's better to go alone. Of course, at present we don't totally lack an admirable friend. We have the example of the Buddha as portrayed in the texts, as a sketch of what an admirable friend would say and do. It's not quite the same as having a real person, because you can't confess your mistakes to a text, and it's all too easy to read your own standards as to what counts as character into a text. But if all you can find around you are people who are lacking in conviction, lacking in virtue, lacking in generosity, and lacking in discernment, it's best not to associate with them. You certainly can't take them as a guide in the path.

Which means that if that's your only option, you have to be your own admirable friend, especially stringent with yourself in developing conviction, virtue, generosity, and discernment, along with all the other qualities of character needed for the practice: honesty, harmlessness, and powers of observation. The lack of an admirable friend is like a deep hole in your path that, with effort, you might eventually get across. But any lack in character is a bottomless pit.

In the Eyes of the Wise

The Buddha's Teachings on Honor & Shame

Several years back, I led a retreat in Santa Fe on the topic of karma. One of the readings was a passage in which the Buddha teaches his seven-year-old son, Rāhula, how to examine his actions, as he would his face in a mirror, to make sure that he harms no one—neither himself nor anyone else. One of the retreatants was a therapist who, the day after the retreat, was scheduled to hold the final meeting of a therapy group she had organized for some of her clients. She decided to Xerox the Buddha's teachings to Rāhula and share them with the group, to get their opinion on the Buddha's parenting skills. Their unanimous verdict: "If our parents had taught us like that, we wouldn't be needing therapy groups like this."

What was striking about their verdict was that they arrived at it even though the Buddha's teaching emphasized the need for Rāhula to develop a sense of shame around his actions: If he didn't feel shame at telling a deliberate lie, he was as empty of goodness as an overturned dipper was empty of water. If he realized that he had engaged in thinking that had harmed himself—or could lead to harm to others—he was to feel ashamed of those thoughts and to resolve not to repeat them.

And the Buddha didn't teach shame only to Rāhula. In his more general teachings to the public, he called shame a bright guardian of the world, in that it kept people from betraying the trust of others. He also called shame a noble treasure, something more valuable than gold or silver in that it would protect you from doing things you'd later regret.

The high value that the Buddha placed on shame contrasts sharply with the way it's regarded in many segments of our culture today. In business and in politics, shame is all too often viewed as weakness. Among therapists, it's commonly seen as pathological—an unhealthy low opinion of yourself that prevents you from being all that you can. Book after book gives counsel on how to overcome feelings of shame and to affirm feelings of self-worth in their place.

It's easy to understand this general reaction against shame. The emotion of shame—the sense that you don't look good in the eyes of others—is a

powerful one. It's where we allow the opinion of other people into our psyches, and all too often unscrupulous people take advantage of that opening to trample our hearts: to bully us and force on us standards of judgment that are not in our genuine best interests. It's bad enough when they try to make us ashamed of things over which we have little or no control: race, appearance, age, gender, sexual orientation, level of intelligence, or financial status. It's even worse when they try to shame us into doing harm, like avenging old wrongs.

But efforts to avoid these problems by totally abolishing shame miss an important point: There are two kinds of shame—the unhealthy shame that's the opposite of self-esteem, and the healthy shame that's the opposite of shamelessness. This second kind of shame is the shame that the Buddha calls a bright guardian and a treasure. If, in our zeal to get rid of the first kind of shame, we also get rid of the second, we'll create a society of sociopaths who care nothing for other people's opinions of right or wrong —or who feel shame about all the wrong things. Businessmen and politicians who see no shame in lying, for instance, feel shame if they're not at least as ruthless as their peers. And for all the general dismissal of shame, advertisers still find that shame over your body or ostensible wealth is a powerful tool for selling products. When all shame gets pathologized, it goes underground in the mind, where people can't think clearly about it, and then sends out tentacles that spread harm all around us.

This is where the Buddha's teachings on healthy shame can be a useful antidote, helping to bring the topic into the open and to show that, with proper training, shame can be a great force for good.

To begin with, the Buddha couples healthy shame with a healthy sense of honor: a sense that you deserve respect for holding to a high standard of conduct. In this sense, shame is a sign of high, rather than low, self esteem.

Honor, like shame, begins with the desire not only to *be* good, but also to *look* good in the eyes of others, which is why it, too, comes in both healthy and unhealthy varieties. Duels, feuds, gang wars, and honor killings—based on the belief that respect is earned by your ability to do violence—have given honor a bad name. But honor can be redefined and made healthy so that it's earned through integrity. A society without this sense of honor would be as bad as a society without healthy shame.

The Buddha's insights into healthy honor and shame came from his own

experience in searching for, and finally finding, awakening. His initial search for the right path had taught him that honor and shame had to be treated with discernment, in that he couldn't always trust the opinion of others. If he had been swayed by the honor shown him by his early teachers, he would have stayed stuck in the practice of concentration without developing discernment. If he had been swayed by the disdain shown by the five brethren when he abandoned his austerities, he would have died without ever finding the goal.

But as he realized after his awakening, the problem with shame and honor is not that you want to look good in the eyes of others. It's just that you want to look good in the wrong people's eyes. If you can focus on the right people, shame and honor can be an enormous help in developing what the Buddha identified as the most important external factor in gaining awakening: admirable friendship. He was now in a position to give others the guidance he had lacked in his own quest, and to teach his disciples to be admirable friends to others. This is why the Buddha set up the monastic Saṅgha: to keep the lineage of admirable friends alive.

But admirable friendship involves more than just making friends with admirable people. You also need to emulate their good qualities. This is where a sense of shame and honor come into the equation. Your desire for your admirable friends to think well of you is a crucial incentive to follow their good example.

The good qualities of admirable friends are four:

- conviction in the Buddha's awakening and in the principle of karma;
- virtue, in the sense of not breaking the precepts or encouraging others to break them;
- generosity, and
- discernment.

The discernment of admirable friends can be seen in two things: the *standards* by which they judge you, and their *purpose* in judging you. If they're really discerning, they'll judge you by your actions—not by your appearance, wealth, or anything else over which you have no control. They'll judge your actions both by the intentions on which you act and on the results of your actions. In both cases—and here's where the Buddha's sense of honor inverts the military sense of honor in which he was trained

as a young prince—the standard of judgment is that you can find happiness in such a way that your intentions and actions harm no one: not you or anyone else.

The purpose for which admirable friends judge you is not simply to arrive at the judgment. They want to help you recognize *why* your mistakes are mistakes, so that you can learn not to repeat them. In this way, they're encouraging you to develop the true source for your happiness: your ability to act with more and more skill.

If they judge you in these ways, your friends show that they've developed both of the discernment factors of the path: right view—in seeing the importance of action—and right resolve, in extending goodwill to you. If you internalize their standards, you're internalizing the path as well.

This is why the Buddha taught Rāhula how to internalize those standards by examining his own actions. That way, even if the society around him was falling apart and he was separated from his admirable friends, he could still live by their values. That would be for his long-term welfare and happiness.

The Buddha prefaced his instructions with the image of a mirror: Just as you use a mirror to see how you look to other people, Rāhula was to look at his actions to see how he appeared in the eyes of the wise. And the wise would have him judge his actions like this:

Whatever he did in thought, word, and deed, he was first to examine his intentions: If he anticipated that the act he planned would cause any harm inside or out, he was not to act on that intention. If he didn't anticipate harm, he could go ahead and act. While acting, he was to check the results of his action. If he was causing unanticipated harm, he should stop. If not, he could continue with the action. After the action was done, he should look at the long-term results of the action. If it turned out that he had caused harm in word or deed, he should talk it over with a trusted friend on the path who would advise him on how to avoid causing that harm again. Then he should resolve not to repeat that action. If his thoughts had caused harm, he should feel shame around that type of thinking and resolve not to repeat it. If he had caused no harm, though, he should take joy in his progress on the path, and keep on training.

In this way, the Buddha didn't simply tell Rāhula to cause no harm. Instead, he told him, in effect, "Try not to cause harm, but if you *do* cause harm, this is how you go about learning from your mistakes." This shows

the element of practical goodwill that pervades these teachings.

As does the Buddha's recommendation for joy. After all, joy is what healthy shame and honor are for: to help you see for yourself the well-being that comes from mastering higher levels of skill and harmlessness in your actions. When this becomes your source of happiness, you grow up, with less need for the approval and affirmations of others. In seeing the power of your actions and really wanting to act in harmless ways, you make right view and right resolve your own.

One of the dangers that can come from shame and honor in admirable friendship is that, out of a desire to look good in your friends' eyes, you might want to show off your good qualities. To counteract this tendency, though, the Buddha warned that if you do, your good qualities immediately get ruined. One of the signs of integrity, he said, is modesty—to speak as little as possible of your own good qualities, and never to exalt yourself over others who lack them.

The other danger of shame and honor is that you might want to hide your mistakes from your admirable friends. This is why the Buddha stressed that, if you've made mistakes in the past but have now learned not to repeat them, you brighten the world like the moon when released from a cloud. And it's also why the Buddha prefaced his instructions to Rāhula with a teaching on truthfulness, letting him know that making a mistake is much less shameful than making a mistake and not admitting it. If you hide your faults, you not only lose the trust of your friends, but you also close the way to making progress on the path. Or even worse: In the Buddha's words, if a person feels no shame in telling a deliberate lie, there's no evil that that person won't do.

The Buddha illustrated this point with the image of elephants in battle. If an elephant goes into battle and uses his feet and tusks, but holds back his trunk, the elephant trainer knows that the elephant hasn't given his life to the king. But if an elephant uses his feet and his tusks and his trunk, the elephant trainer knows that the elephant has given his life to his king. There's nothing it won't do.

This image is a good lesson in the Buddha's revolutionary sense of honor. At first glance, it would seem that the elephant who doesn't hold back would be the hero of the image—after all, that's the kind of elephant a king would want to send into battle, and it represents the kind of honor

often extolled in warrior cultures. But the Buddha is actually presenting the image in a negative light: The elephant's willingness to risk its trunk is a sign of its servility to the king. In effect, the Buddha's telling Rāhula that if, like the elephant who protects his trunk, he's heedful to protect his truthfulness, it's a point of genuine honor: a sign that he's a servant to no one, neither to anyone outside nor to his own defilements inside.

This inversion of the old military sense of honor is echoed in the Buddha's comment that better than victory in battle over a thousand-thousand men is victory over one person: yourself.

The Buddha's instructions in training Rāhula to develop a healthy sense of honor and shame eventually bore fruit. Instead of taking pride in the fact that he was the Buddha's son, Rāhula showed a willingness to learn from all the monks. And after he gained awakening, the Buddha extolled him for being foremost among the monks in his desire to learn.

Of course, at that point Rāhula didn't need the Buddha's praise. He had already found a deathless happiness that was beyond the reach of other people's respect. Actually, the Buddha was praising Rāhula for our sake, to let us know that shame and honor can be useful tools on the path. If you're careful in choosing whose opinions you let into your psyche, and internalize the qualities that make shame and honor healthy, you'll not only look good in the eyes of the wise. Your eyes will become wise as well.

Did the Buddha Teach Free Will?

As with so many other issues, the Buddha took a middle path between the two extremes of determinism and total free will. If all your experience were predetermined from the past—through impersonal fate, the design of a creator god, or your own past actions—the whole idea of a path of practice to the end of suffering would be nonsense. You wouldn't be able to choose to follow such a path, and there wouldn't be such a path for you to choose in the first place: Everything would have already been determined. However, if your choices in the present moment were totally free, with no constraints from the past, that would mean that your present actions would, in turn, have no impact on the future. It'd be like flailing around in a vacuum: You could move your arms in any way you wanted, but you'd still be flailing.

The Buddha took this issue so seriously that, even though he rarely sought out other teachers to argue with them, he *would* if they taught determinism or the chaos of total freedom.

His alternative to their teachings was to outline a causal principle in which present experience is a combination of three things: the results of past intentions—your old karma; present intentions; and the results of present intentions. Your present intentions are the determining factor as to whether the mind does or doesn't suffer in any given moment. They're also the factor where freedom can come into the mixture. Past karma is a given, providing the raw material that your present karma can shape into present experience; the principle of causality is a given, providing the ground rules as to which present actions will or won't give good results. These givens provide, so to speak, the point of contact against which present actions can push and pull and actually propel you in a particular direction. The wider the range of skills you bring to your present actions, the more freedom you gain in knowing how to push and pull skillfully—and the more you'll be able and willing to act on this knowledge.

So the whole purpose of Buddhist practice is to expand your range of skills in the present moment. Take, for instance, the three qualities that the Buddha recommended be brought to the practice of mindfulness leading to concentration and discernment: *alertness,* the ability to be clearly aware of what you're doing as you do it, along with the results that come from what

you're doing; *mindfulness,* the ability to keep in mind lessons you've learned both from Dhamma instructions and from you own actions, as to what's beneficial and what's harmful; and *ardency,* the whole-hearted desire to act as skillfully as you can with every moment. As you develop these skills, you build a fund of knowledge as to what works and doesn't work in leading to true happiness. You also become a more discerning judge as to how to rate what it means to "work" and "not work." And as you learn how to not be overcome by pleasure or pain—by maintaining your focus in the practice of concentration even in the presence of intense pleasure, and by comprehending pain to the point of not suffering from it—you become like an expert cook, able to make good food out of whatever, good or bad, is in the kitchen pantry.

The Buddha never explains why we have this potential for freedom of choice in the present moment. He just teaches how best to take advantage of it. If you follow his advice in exploring how far it can go, it leads you ultimately to a freedom of a totally different sort: a dimension absolutely free from conditions, the greatest freedom there is.

To fully awaken to this dimension releases you from all the roots of unskillful behavior: greed, aversion, and delusion. You've mastered the skills needed not to suffer from past karma and to not create any new karma with your present intentions. From that point on until death, you're free to will only what is skillful. After death, your freedom is so total that it can't be described.

It's for the sake of this freedom that, instead of simply taking a position on free will, the Buddha taught how you can free your will from the unskillful limitations that keep it bound. Even if you don't make it all the way to full awakening in this lifetime, you find that by developing the skills he recommends, you broaden the freedom you bring to the culinary art that is your life.

First Things First

If you were to ask people familiar with Buddhism to identify its two most important wisdom teachings, they'd probably say emptiness and the four noble truths. If you were to ask them further which of the two teachings was more fundamental, they might hesitate, but most of them would probably put emptiness first, on the grounds that the four noble truths deal with a mental problem, while emptiness describes the way things in general *are.*

It wasn't always this way. The Buddha himself gave more importance to the four noble truths, and it's important to understand why.

When he boiled his teaching down to its shortest formulation, he said that he taught just *dukkha*—suffering and stress—and the cessation of dukkha (MN 22; SN 22:86). The four noble truths expand on this formulation, defining what suffering is—clinging; how it's caused—craving and ignorance; the fact that it can be brought to an end by abandoning its cause; and the path of practice that leads to that end. Because part of the path of practice contains desire—the desire, in right effort, to act skillfully so as to go beyond suffering—the four noble truths also expand on one of the Buddha's main observations about the phenomena of experience: that with the exception of nibbāna, they're all rooted in desire (AN 10:58). People aren't simply passive recipients of their experience. Starting from their desires, they play an active role in shaping it. The strategy implied by the four noble truths is that desire should be retrained so that, instead of causing suffering, it helps act toward suffering's end.

As for emptiness, the Buddha mentioned it only rarely, but one of his definitions for emptiness (SN 35:85) closely relates it to another teaching that he mentioned a great deal. That's the teaching popularly known as the three characteristics, and that the Buddha himself called, not "characteristics," but "perceptions": the perception of inconstancy, the perception of suffering/stress, and the perception of not-self. When explaining these perceptions, he taught that if you perceive fabricated things —all things conditioned by acts of intention—as inconstant, you'll also see that they're stressful and thus not worthy identifying as you or yours.

His purpose in teaching these perceptions was for them to be applied to suffering and its cause as a way of fostering dispassion for the objects of clinging and craving, and for the acts of clinging and craving themselves. In this way, these perceptions were aids in carrying out the duties appropriate to the four noble truths: to comprehend suffering, to abandon its cause, to realize its cessation by developing the path. In other words, the four noble truths and their duties supplied the context for the three perceptions and determined their role in the practice.

However, over the centuries, as the three perceptions were renamed the three characteristics, they morphed in two other ways as well. First, they turned into a metaphysical teaching, as the characteristics of what things *are:* All are devoid of essence because they're impermanent and, since nothing has any essence, there is no self. Second, because these three characteristics were now metaphysical truths, they became the context within which the four noble truths were true.

This switch in roles meant that the four noble truths morphed as well. Whereas the Buddha had identified suffering with all types of clinging—even the act of clinging to the phenomenon of the deathless *(amata-dhamma),* the unchanging dimension touched at the first taste of awakening—the relationship between clinging and suffering was now explained by the metaphysical fact that all possible objects of clinging were impermanent. To cling to them as if they were permanent would thus bring sorrow and disappointment.

As for the ignorance that underlies craving: Whereas the Buddha had defined it as ignorance of the four noble truths, it was now defined as ignorance of the three characteristics. People cling and crave because they don't realize that nothing has any essence and that there is no self. If they were to realize the truth of these teachings through direct experience—this became the purpose of mindfulness practice—they wouldn't cling any more, and so wouldn't suffer.

This is how this switch in context, giving priority to the three characteristics over the four noble truths, has come to dominate modern Buddhism. The common pattern is that when modern authors explain right view, which the Buddha equated with seeing things in terms of the four noble truths, the discussion quickly switches from the four noble truths to the three characteristics to explain why clinging leads to suffering. Clinging

is no longer directly equated with suffering; instead, it *causes* suffering because it assumes permanence and essence in impermanent things.

Even teachers who deny the truth of the four noble truths—on the grounds that the principle of impermanence means that no statement can be true everywhere for everyone—still accept the principle of impermanence as a metaphysical truth accurately describing the way things everywhere are.

As these explanations have percolated through modern culture, both among people who identify themselves as Buddhist and among those who don't, they've given rise to four widespread understandings of the Buddha's teachings on clinging and how it's best avoided so as to stop suffering:

> *1. Because there is no self, there is no agent. People are essentially on the receiving end of experience, and they suffer because they cling to the idea that they can resist or control change.*
>
> *2. To cling means to hold on to something with the misunderstanding that it's permanent. For this reason, as long as you understand that things are impermanent, you can embrace them briefly as they arise in the present moment and it doesn't count as clinging. If you embrace experiences in full realization that you'll have to let them go so as to embrace whatever comes next, you won't suffer. As long as you're fully in the moment with no expectations about the future, you're fine.*
>
> *3. Clinging comes from the mistaken view that there can be such a thing as long-term happiness. But because all things are fleeting, there is no such thing. Pleasures, like pains, simply come and go. When you can resign yourself to this fact, you can open to the spacious wisdom of non-clinging, equanimous and accepting, as you place no vain expectations on the fleeting show of life.*

These three understandings are often illustrated with the image of a perfectly fluid dancer, happily responsive to changes in the music decided by the musicians, switching partners with ease.

A recent bestseller that devoted a few pages to the place of Buddhism in world history illustrated these three understandings of the Buddhist approach to suffering with another image: You're sitting on the ocean shore, watching the waves come in. If you're stupid enough to want to cling to "good" waves to make them permanent and to push "bad" waves away,

you'll suffer. But if you accept the fact that waves are just waves, fleeting and incessant, and that there's no way you can either stop or keep them, you can be at peace as you simply watch, with full acceptance, as they do their thing.

The fourth widespread understanding about the Buddhist stance on clinging is closely related to the other three:

> *4. Clinging means holding on to fixed views. If you have set ideas about what's right or wrong, or about how things should be—even about how the Buddha's teachings should be interpreted—you'll suffer. But if you can let go of your fixed views and simply accept the fact that right and wrong keep changing along with everything else, you'll be fine.*

I recently saw a video clip of a French Buddhologist explaining this principle: When asked by a female interviewer to illustrate the practical applications of the teaching on impermanence in daily life, he looked her in the eye and said, "It means lovers have to accept that their love today will have to express itself differently from their love yesterday."

It's been argued that these four understandings of the Buddha's teachings on clinging don't promote an attitude of unhealthy passivity, on the grounds that if you're fully attuned to the present moment without clinging, you can be more freely active and creative in how you respond to change. But still, there's something inherently defeatist in the picture they offer of life and of the possibilities of happiness that we as human beings can find. They allow for no long-term happiness, no dimension where we can be free from the unpredictability of waves or the self-righteous infidelity of lovers. It's only within this narrow range of possibilities that our non-clinging creativity can eke out a little peace.

And when we compare these understandings with the Buddha's actual teachings on clinging and the end of clinging—returning the three characteristics to their original role as three perceptions, and putting the four noble truths back in their rightful place as the context for the three perceptions—we'll see not only how far the popular understandings of his teachings deviate from what he actually taught, but also what an impoverished view of the potentials for happiness those popular understandings provide.

To begin with, a lot can be learned from looking at the Pāli word for

clinging, *upādāna.* In addition to clinging, it also means sustenance and the act of taking sustenance: in other words, food and the act of feeding. The connection between feeding and suffering was one of the Buddha's most radical and valuable insights, because it's so counter-intuitive and at the same time so useful. Ordinarily, we find so much pleasure in the act of feeding, emotionally as well as physically, that we define ourselves by the way we feed off the world and the people around us. It took someone of the Buddha's genius to see the suffering inherent in feeding, and that *all* suffering is a type of feeding. The fact that we feed off things that change simply adds an extra layer of stress on top of the stress intrinsic in the felt need always to feed.

And just as we feed off physical food without assuming that it's going to be permanent, clinging to things doesn't necessarily mean that we assume them to be permanent. We cling whenever we sense that the effort of clinging is repaid by some sort of satisfaction, permanent or not. We cling because there's some pleasure in the things to which we cling (SN 22:60). When we can't find what we'd like to cling to, our hunger forces us to take what we can get. For this reason, the act of embracing things in the present moment still counts as clinging. Even if we're adept at moving from one changing thing to another, it simply means that we're serial clingers, taking little bites out of every passing thing. We still suffer in the incessant drive to keep finding the next bite to eat.

This is why being constantly mindful of the truth of impermanence isn't enough to solve the problem of suffering. To really solve it, we need to change our feeding habits—radically—so that we can strengthen the mind to the point where it no longer needs to feed. This requires a two-pronged strategy: (a) seeing the drawbacks of our ordinary ways of feeding, and (b) providing the mind with better food in the meantime until it has outgrown the need to feed on anything at all.

The first prong of the strategy is where the three perceptions come in. First you apply them to things to which you might cling or crave, to see that the benefits of holding on to those things are far outweighed by the drawbacks. You focus on the extent to which the happiness they provide is inconstant, and that because it's inconstant, the effort to rest in it involves stress. When you see that the happiness isn't worth the effort of the clinging, you realize that it's not worthy to claim as you or yours. It's not-self: in other words, not worth claiming as self. In this way, the perception of not-

self isn't a metaphysical assertion. It's a value judgment, that the effort to define yourself around the act of feeding on those things simply isn't worth it.

This analysis works, however, only if you have something better to feed on in the interim. Otherwise, you'll simply go back to your old feeding habits. Nobody ever stopped eating simply through the realization that foods and stomachs are impermanent.

This is where the second prong of the Buddha's strategy comes in. You develop the path as your interim nourishment, focusing in particular on the pleasure and rapture of right concentration as your alternative source of food (AN 7:63). When the path is fully developed, it opens to another dimension entirely: the deathless, a happiness beyond the reach of space, time, and all phenomena of the six senses.

But because the mind is such a habitual feeder, on its first encounter with the deathless it tries to feed on it—which turns the experience into a phenomenon, an object of the mind. Of course, that act of feeding stands in the way of full awakening. This is where the perception of not-self gets put to use once more, to counteract this last form of clinging: to the deathless. Even though the deathless in itself is neither stressful nor inconstant, any act of clinging to it has to involve stress. So the perception of not-self has to be applied here as well, to peel away this last obstacle to full awakening beyond all phenomena. When this perception has done its work, "not-self" gets put aside—just as everything else is let go—and the mind, free from hunger, gains full release.

A traditional image for this release is of a person standing on firm ground after taking the raft of the noble eightfold path over a river in flood. Safe from the waves and currents of the river, the person is totally free—even freer than the image can convey. There's nothing intrinsically hunger-free about standing on a riverbank—it's more a symbol of relief—but everyone who has experienced what the image is pointing to guarantees that, to the extent that you can call it a place, it's a place of no hunger and so no need for desire.

If we compare this image with that of the person on the shore of the ocean watching the waves, we can get a sense of how limited the happiness that's offered by understanding the four noble truths in the context of the three characteristics is, as opposed to the happiness offered by

understanding the three perceptions in the context of the four noble truths.

To begin with, the Buddha's image of crossing the river doesn't put quotation marks around concepts of good and bad waves in the water. The flood is genuinely bad, and the ultimate goodness in life is when you can truly get beyond it.

Second, unlike the image of sitting on the shore, watching an ocean beyond your control, the Buddha's image conveys the point that there's something you can *do* to get to safety: You have within you the power to follow the duties of the four noble truths and develop the path that will take you to the other side. As he said, wisdom begins with the question, "What when I do it will lead to long-term welfare and happiness?" (MN 135) The wisdom here lies in seeing that there is such a thing as long-term happiness, that it's preferable to short-term, and that it depends, not on conditions beyond your control, but on actions you can train yourself to do. This version of wisdom is a far cry from the "wisdom" that ends in resigned equanimity and reduced expectations. It honors your desire for long-term happiness, and shows how it can actually be found.

Third, to sit watching the ocean waves come ashore is peaceful and desirable only as long as you're wealthy enough to be at a resort, with someone to bring you food, drink, and shelter on a regular basis. Otherwise, you have to keep searching for these things on your own. And even at the resort, you're not safe from being swept away by tsunamis and storms.

The image of crossing the river to safety on the further shore also offers an enlightening perspective on the view that all fixed views should be abandoned. In the Canon's own interpretation of the image (SN 35:197), the river stands for the fourfold flood of sensuality, becoming, views, and ignorance, while the raft of the noble eightfold path includes right view. Although it's true that the raft is abandoned on reaching the further shore, you still have to hold on to it while you're crossing the river. Otherwise, you'll be swept downstream.

What's rarely noticed is the paradox contained in the image. Right view, seeing things in terms of the four noble truths, is part of the raft needed to cross over the flood of views. As the Buddha saw, it's the only view that can perform this function, taking you safely all the way across the river and delivering you to the further shore.

It can take you all the way across because it's always true and relevant.

Cultural changes may affect what we choose to feed on, but the fact of feeding is a constant, as is the connection between suffering and the need to feed. In that sense, right view counts as fixed. It can never be replaced by a more effective understanding of suffering. At the same time, it's always relevant in that the framework of the four noble truths can be brought to bear on every choice you make at every stage of the practice. Here it differs from the three perceptions, for while the Buddha noted that they're always true (AN 3:137), they're not always relevant (MN 136). If, for instance, you perceive the results of all actions, skillful or not, as impermanent, stressful, and not-self, it can dissuade you from making the effort to be skillful in what you do, say, or think.

In addition to being always true and relevant, right view is responsible. It gives reliable guidance on what should and shouldn't be taken as food for the mind. As the Buddha said, any teaching that can't give trustworthy guidelines for determining what's skillful and unskillful to do abdicates a teacher's primary responsibility to his or her students (AN 3:62). The Buddhologist's answer to the interviewer exemplifies how irresponsible the teaching to abandon fixed views can be. And the look she gave him showed that she wanted nothing of it.

After taking you responsibly all the way across the river, right view can deliver you to the further shore because it contains the seeds for its own transcendence, which—as you develop them—deliver you to a transcendent dimension (AN 10:93). Right view does this by focusing on the processes by which the mind creates stress for itself, at the same time encouraging you to abandon those processes when you sense that they're causing stress. In the beginning, this involves clinging to right view as a tool to pry loose your attachments to gross causes of stress. Over time, as your taste for mental food becomes more refined through its exposure to right concentration, you become sensitive to causes of stress that are more and more subtle. These you abandon as you come to detect them, until eventually there's nothing else to abandon aside from the path. That's when right view encourages you to turn the analysis on the act of holding on to and feeding on right view itself. When you can abandon that, there's nothing left for the mind to cling to, and so it's freed.

The view that all fixed views should be abandoned, however, doesn't contain this dynamic. It provides no grounds for deciding what should and shouldn't be done. In itself, it can act as an object of craving and clinging,

becoming as fixed as any other view. If you decide to drop it, for whatever reason, it delivers you nowhere. It offers no guidance on how to choose anything better, and as a result, you end up clinging to whatever passing view seems attractive. You're still stuck in the river, grasping at pieces of flotsam and jetsam as the flood carries you away.

This is why it's always important to remember that, in the practice to gain freedom from suffering, the four noble truths must always come first. They give guidance to the rest of the path, determining the role and function of all the Buddha's other teachings—including emptiness and the three perceptions—so that, instead of lulling you into being satisfied with an exposed spot on the beach, they can take you all the way to the safety of full release, beyond the reach of any possible wave.

The Karma of Now

Why the Present Moment Isn't the Goal

Have you ever wondered why Buddhist meditation focuses so much attention on observing the mind in the present moment? It's because of the way the Buddha taught kamma, or action.

His teachings on kamma were so central to all of his teachings that when he classified himself as a teacher, he used the label, *kamma-vādin*: someone who teaches action. This was to distinguish himself from the many contemporary teachers in India who taught that action was unreal or that it had no consequences.

But he also found it necessary to distinguish himself from other *kamma-vādins.* In cases like that, he didn't use a label to explain the differences, which were too complex to fit into an easy label. But he did emphasize two main points where his teachings departed from theirs: (1) the issue of how kamma shaped the present moment and (2) the issue of which kind of action, physical or mental, was more important in shaping experience.

With regard to the first question, a *kamma-vādin* group called the Nigaṇṭhas taught that the present moment was shaped entirely by your past actions. This meant that your present actions could have an influence on the future, but not on what you're experiencing right now. The Nigaṇṭhas also believed that all kamma resulted in suffering, which meant that the only way to put an end to suffering would be to stop acting. So their practice consisted of austerities in which they endured sharp pains in the present moment without reacting to them. That way, they believed, they would burn off past kamma while creating no new kamma. Freedom from suffering would come when all past kamma was burned away.

If you envision the Buddha as uttering nothing but sweetness and light, it may come as a shock to learn how thoroughly he ridiculed the Nigaṇṭhas over this belief. To paraphrase some of his remarks (MN 101), he once asked them if they could possibly measure how much kamma they burned off through their practice, or how much remained to be burned. As for their claims that suffering in the present came entirely from past kamma, he asked them if they hadn't noticed that the pain caused when they were

doing their austerities stopped when they stopped doing the austerities.

In other words, he was pointing to the fact that what you do in the present moment can have an influence not only on the future, but also on what you experience right now. Past actions may have some role in shaping your present experience of pleasure and pain, but they don't totally determine it. In fact, present actions can make all the difference between whether a past bad action leads to a lot of suffering right now or only a little (AN 3:101). This means that the present moment doesn't arrive ready-built. We're constantly constructing it as it's happening, with greater or less skill, out of the raw materials provided by past kamma.

As for the second question, the Niganṭhas taught that physical action was more important than mental action. This is why they made no attempt to understand the psychology of action. All they had to do with past kamma, they thought, was to believe that it existed and to burn it off through austerities. The Buddha, however, taught that mental action was more important than physical action. There's only one place in the Pāli Canon where he explicitly defines action as intention (AN 6:63), but in many discourses, such as SN 12:25, he treats intention as synonymous with kamma; in others, such as MN 56, he gives extended arguments for why mental action is more important than physical action.

These two features of the Buddhist teaching on action—the role of present action in shaping the present in addition to the future, and the central importance of mental actions—explain why Buddhist meditation focuses on observing and understanding the mind in the here and now. But they also explain even more. They tell us what we can expect to see there, what we try to do with it, and—because the present moment, like the past and future, is by definition an on-going construction site—why we have to go beyond it if we want to put an end to all suffering and stress. The present moment is never simply to be accepted as it is. Because part of it is constructed in the present, it can always be improved; it can even be turned into the path to the end of suffering. But, because it's *always* under construction, it's at best only the path, never the goal. To borrow an image from the Canon, the present is like a house that constantly needs repair, not just because it keeps disintegrating right before your eyes, never to return, but also because it's on fire with the flames of suffering. The path of practice is not meant to keep you in the house. Its function is help you find the way out.

WHEN THE BUDDHA talks about the importance of the present moment, he often portrays it as a place where work has to be done: the work of improving your skills in how to construct it. And the motivation for doing the work is provided by contemplation of death—the message being that if you don't do the work needed to get your mind under control, you have no idea where it will take you at death, and the work won't get done unless you do it right now. MN 131, for instance, contains a famous passage on the importance of focusing on the present moment:

> You shouldn't chase after the past
> or place expectations on the future.
> What is past
> is left behind.
> The future
> is as yet unreached.
> Whatever quality is present
> you clearly see
> right there,
> right there.
> Not taken in,
> unshaken,
> that's how you develop the heart.

But then the reason it offers for focusing "right there" is death:

> Ardently doing
> your duty
> today,
> for—who knows?
> — tomorrow
> death.
> There is no bargaining
> with Mortality & his mighty horde.

The "duty" referred to here is the fourfold duty pertaining to the four noble truths: to comprehend suffering, abandon its cause, realize its cessation, and develop the path to its cessation. This work needs to be done in the present moment because suffering is experienced, and its cause keeps

getting created, right here.

To focus your efforts, the Buddha sketches, in his teaching on dependent co-arising, an outline of what suffering is and the steps by which the mind creates it. The outline applies to many different time frames, from the span of a moment to many lifetimes, but he found it by contemplating the present moment, and that's where it's most effectively applied.

We may think that the present moment begins with contact at the senses, but the Buddha's outline lists several steps prior to sensory contact, steps determining whether that contact will become a condition for suffering. One of the most important of these steps is "fabrication" *(saṅkhāra),* the process that fashions our sense of the body and all other activities of the mind: what the Buddha calls the five aggregates of physical form, feeling, perception (mental labeling), fabrication, and consciousness. Because he defines each of these aggregates with a verb—even your sense of your physical form "deforms"—they are best regarded as actions, rather than things (SN 22:79). This is why the present moment is always under construction: If you want an aggregate to persist from one moment to the next, you have to keep doing it. Otherwise, it'll cease.

The fact that the fabrication of all these aggregates comes prior to sensory contact means that the mind is not simply a passive recipient of contact. Instead, it's proactive, on the prowl, out looking for contact to feed on. Even before you see a sight or hear a sound, your mind has already fashioned acts of consciousness, intention, attention, and perception that shape what the mind will perceive in the sensory contact, what it will pay attention to, and what it will try to get out of it. As SN 22:79 notes, fabrication is always "for the sake of" creating the aggregates, which in turn act for the purpose of the desires that drive them (SN 22:5).

A peculiar feature of dependent co-arising is that the six sense media—the five physical senses plus the mind as the sixth—are classified as old kamma, whereas intention, which counts as new kamma, comes before them in the list. Of course, there are intentions that follow on sensory contact, but the fact that intention also occurs prior to sensory contact means that when you're fully in the present moment, you can sense the new kamma created in that moment before sensing the results of old kamma coming in through the senses. This is why, when trying to put an end to suffering, the Buddha doesn't tell you to blame the suffering on the world

outside: painful sights, sounds, or tactile sensations. Instead, you have to look at what you're doing right now that can create suffering out of sensory contact regardless of whether it's painful or pleasant.

At the same time, because the present moment is fabricated in this way, and because fabrication is always "for the sake of" something, the present is, at best, only a temporary resting spot. Even when you manage to "be the knowing" in the present, that knowing is the consciousness aggregate—fabricated cognizing—and the underlying fabrication has a time-arrow embedded in it, pointing to a purpose beyond itself. Usually, that purpose is happiness, either right now or in the future.

This is why, when stepping fully into the present moment, you don't really step out of time. In fact, the present is where the conditions for future time are being created. Even when the process of fabrication aims solely at pleasure in the present with no thought for the future, it's always creating kamma that has both present and future ramifications. The way you build your home in the present creates the raw material from which you'll fashion present moments in the future. The hedonists and meditators who pride themselves on not sacrificing the present moment for the sake of a future happiness are simply turning a blind eye to an important aspect of what they're doing: the long-term karmic consequences of how they search for pleasure now.

And the blindness of that eye doesn't shield them from those consequences (SN 12:25). If it did, the Buddha would have simply taught you to follow your bliss, without feeling obliged to teach the precepts or to warn you against the dangers of getting stuck on the calm pleasures of a still mind. He wouldn't have taught that wisdom begins by looking both at present actions and at their long-term results (MN 135). Actually, a blind eye is a synonym for ignorance, which is the underlying condition for acts of fabrication leading to suffering. So those who focus on being in the present for its own sake are simply setting themselves up to suffer more.

But if we bring knowledge to the process of fabrication, we can turn fabrication from a cause of suffering into the path leading to its end. The beginning part of that knowledge comes in the form of right view—what the Buddha taught about the fabrication of the aggregates—but the effective part comes from getting hands-on experience in trying to build something really skillful and pleasant out of aggregates in the present moment. This is

the role of the more active factors of the path: right resolve, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Right resolve sets the intention to look for a happiness that's harmless and free from sensuality; right effort actually carries through with that intention; right mindfulness—which, in the Buddha's analysis, is a function of memory—remembers how to develop skillful states and abandon unskillful ones (MN 117; AN 4:245); and right concentration turns the aggregates into a pleasant and bright dwelling: "an easeful abiding in the here-and-now" (AN 4:41).

The important point to notice here is that, just as fabrication in general is proactive, the Buddha's approach to really comprehending fabrication—with the purpose of going beyond it—is proactive as well. You don't learn about fabrications simply by watching them come and go on their own, because they don't come and go on their own. They're driven by purposeful desires. And the best way to learn about those desires is to create skillful desires to thwart any unskillful purposes that might underlie them. Just as the Army Corps of Engineers has learned a lot about the Mississippi River by proactively trying to keep it in its channel, you learn a lot about fabrication by proactively trying to put it and keep it in right concentration.

Even the seemingly passive and accepting qualities that the Buddha recommends as part of the path—such as equanimity, patience, and contentment—are types of kamma, and they have to play their role in a primarily proactive context. They focus acceptance only on the results of past kamma, but not on the prospect of creating more new unskillful kamma in the present.

Equanimity, for instance, is never taught as a positive value on its own. As the Buddha notes, it can be either skillful or unskillful (DN 21), and if developed exclusively it can lead to stagnation in the path (AN 3:103). This is why he teaches equanimity in the context of other qualities to ensure that it plays a positive role. For instance, in the context of the sublime attitudes *(brahmavihāra),* he teaches the equanimity of a doctor: The ideal doctor is motivated by goodwill for his patients, compassionate when they're suffering, and joyful with their recovery, but he also needs equanimity in the face of diseases that—because of his or the patient's past kamma—he can't cure. This doesn't mean that he abandons his efforts, simply that he learns to be equanimous about the areas where he can't help so that he can focus his compassion on areas where he can.

Similarly, the Buddha distinguishes between skillful and unskillful patience. He advises being patient with painful feelings and harsh, hurtful words, but impatient with unskillful qualities arising in the mind (MN 2). His patience is not the patience of a water buffalo who simply endures the work and punishments imposed on it. Instead, it's the patience of a warrior who, despite wounds and setbacks, never abandons the desire to come out victorious (AN 5:139–140).

And as for contentment, the Buddha teaches contentment for some things and discontent for others. When he lists the customs of the noble ones, for instance, he starts with contentment with food, clothing, and shelter, but then concludes the list with a more proactive custom: delighting in abandoning unskillful qualities and delighting in developing skillful ones (AN 4:28). In other words, you don't practice contentment with unskillful qualities in the mind, and you don't rest content with the level of skillfulness you've already attained. In fact, the Buddha once stated that discontent even with skillful qualities was one of the crucial factors leading to his awakening (AN 2:5).

This element of discontent is what drives the path. In the beginning, it inspires you to construct right concentration as your dwelling place so that you can use the accompanying pleasure and stability to pry loose your attachment to building unskillful mental dwellings that lead to blatant suffering and stress. You see that the normal pleasures of the senses are aflame—that so much of sensual pleasure lies, not in the actual contact at the senses, but in all the mental fabrications that dress it up to be more than it is. In this way, you come to appreciate all the more the pleasure of concentration. It's much cooler, more easeful, and requires less elaboration. But as you get more proficient in this skill, you become more sensitive to subtler levels of stress and disturbance in the mind, to the point where you sense that even the concentration, because it's constructed of aggregates, is not fully a place of rest. It requires constant care and management (AN 9:36; MN 52).

This is where you come to appreciate why the Buddha calls right concentration *jhāna*. This word means "absorption," but its corresponding verb—*jhāyati,* to do jhāna—also means to burn with a steady flame. Because the pleasures of the senses are like fires that burn with a flickering flame, the pleasures of jhāna seem much less disturbing. And they're easier to read by—in other words, dwelling in jhāna makes it easier to read the processes

of fabrication as they're happening. But still, your jhāna-dwelling is a home subtly on fire. When this realization goes deep into the heart, you're inclined to abandon all fabrication of every sort. And because present-moment fabrication underlies your experience of the present, then when fabrication stops, the present moment fades away—as does space and time altogether—exposing a first taste of unbinding *(nibbāna).*

Because unbinding is unfabricated, it doesn't exist for the sake of anything. This is why it's fully a place of refuge and rest (SN 44). The Buddha describes it as pleasure, but it's not a pleasant feeling, and so it's not an aggregate (SN 36:19). Similarly, he describes it as a type of consciousness, but one that's not known in conjunction with the six senses (MN 49). In other words, it has no object (SN 12:64). Because it doesn't fall under the consciousness-aggregate, it lies outside of past, present, and future. Outside of space, it has "neither coming nor going nor staying in place." It's a separate dimension entirely (Ud 8:1).

After the mind withdraws from this dimension, it returns to fabricating the present moment, but with a big difference. It now knows that it's experienced something that time and the present moment can't touch, and this realization informs your practice from that point onward. You have no more doubts about the Buddha, because you've seen that what he taught is true: There really is a deathless happiness. You no longer identify the aggregates in any way as you or yours, because you've seen what lies beyond them. And you would never engage in them in a way that would break the precepts, because you've seen that your harmful actions in the past were what kept you from realizing that dimension in the first place.

The Canon says that when you finally reach full awakening, you go beyond a taste of unbinding to full immersion. And when you emerge, your experience of the present moment is even more radically altered. You still engage in intentions, but they leave no seeds for future rebirth (AN 3:34). You engage in fabrication, but experience it "disjoined" from it—not in the sense of a person suffering from dissociation, but in the sense of having no more need to commandeer fabrications to construct a place in which to live (MN 140). You dwell instead in a dwelling of emptiness—not the emptiness of the six senses or the aggregates, but the emptiness of an awareness free from the disturbances of defilement (MN 121; Iti 44). At death, liberated entirely from space and time, you have no need for any dwelling of any sort. The fires are totally out, and you're totally freed.

This freedom may seem very far away, but it's good to learn about it from the very beginning of the path. That way, you can come into the present right now and know what to do with it. At the very least, you can develop the skills to make it livable, even in the face of negative influences from the past. And you can create good conditions for present moments in the future. But you also know that the Buddha's focusing you on the present moment, not for its own sake, but for the sake of something that lies beyond. You don't have to resign yourself to accepting the present as the only reality there is, and you're not being asked to deny the flames that consume it. Instead, the Buddha's advising you to dampen the flames so that you can find, right in the midst of the present, the passage leading from the burning house to the safety of the non-flammable freedom outside.

The Streams of Emotion

There's a part of the mind that doesn't like the emotions the Buddha labels as unskillful—things like lust, anger, anxiety, and greed—but there's also a part that does. With anger for instance, it's easy to like the power and exhilaration that come when you see something wrong and feel free to do and say whatever you want to correct it. With lust, you feel attracted not only to the object of your lust, but also to the lust itself—or to the idea that the lust makes *you* attractive. There's even a part of the mind that likes anxiety—the part telling you that if you worry enough about potential problems, you can make them go away.

But then there's the downside. After these emotions have passed, you often regret what you did under their power: actions that harmed you or other people. These are the moments when you'd like to find a way not to be overcome by these things.

Still, the part of the mind that likes lust and anger doesn't go away easily. When it reads the Buddha's take on unskillful emotions—that we should restrain them, should "abandon, destroy, dispel them, and wipe them out of existence" (MN 2)—it can come up with reasons for rejecting these instructions as short-sighted and unsophisticated. After all, simply suppressing or avoiding an emotion won't make it go away. It'll just go underground, like The Thing, only to shoot up tentacles somewhere down the line. This is why we often prefer to hear teachings that tell us that we can have our cake and eat it, too—that we can allow the emotion to flow and grow, and yet use our discernment to pick out the poisonous part, saving ourselves from what would otherwise be its bad consequences.

But nowhere in the early Canon does the Buddha say that restraint is enough to get rid of an unskillful emotion. Referring to these emotions as "streams," he says instead:

> Whatever streams
> there are in the world:
> Their blocking is
> mindfulness. Mindfulness
> is their restraint, I tell you.

With discernment
they're finally stopped. — *Sn 5:1*

In other words, being mindful to say No to an emotion is only a first step in getting past it. To get totally beyond it requires discernment: detecting *why* you go for the emotion, *how* there's a better alternative, and *what* that alternative is. Only then can you be freed from the power the emotion has had over you.

But still, to see these things clearly requires that you first hold the emotion in check. Only then will the part of the mind that likes the emotion show its stripes. It's like trying to know the currents of a river: Even though its surface may seem placid and calm, you don't really know how strong its bottom currents are until you try to build a dam across it. In the same way, you don't really know the mind's real reasons for clinging to an emotion unless you refuse to go along with it. That's when they'll start showing themselves. And you have to say No again and again, because all too often they won't fully reveal themselves the first time you thwart them. After all, some of these reasons can be childish and embarrassing, so the mind is clever in fabricating lies to hide them from itself. Only when you're firm and wise to their tricks can you can really see them. And only when you see them can you use the tools of discernment provided by the Buddha to free yourself from the ways the mind actually afflicts itself.

So mindfulness is just a preliminary step in getting past an unskillful emotion. And "mindfulness," here, carries the Buddha's original meaning of the term: to keep something in mind. It doesn't just accept the way things flow. It's like a gatekeeper who remembers who to let through the gate and who not (AN 7:63). In the case of an unskillful emotion, it first has to remember to notice when such an emotion arises and to recognize it for what it is: a hindrance, blocking the path to awakening (DN 22). This right here goes against the flow. For instance, when lust arises, we don't usually notice it until it's fairly strong. And when we *do* notice it, our first thought isn't, "Oh, a hindrance." It's usually, "Great! Here's my chance for some entertainment!" So we have to establish mindfulness in a way that's constantly alert to these things and to the fact that, if we want to put an end to suffering and stress, we have to see them, not as our friends, but as obstacles. When we recognize them as unskillful, we also have to remember the tools that can help us get past them.

The Buddha's instructions for establishing mindfulness are actually instructions for how to get the mind into a state of solid and pleasant concentration so that it can be steadily alert at all times. When your mind can stay solidly with something comfortable in the present moment—such as the breath—it can see itself more clearly and feel less ravenous for the food offered by anger and lust. At the same time, as you master the processes of getting the mind into concentration, you get hands-on experience with the first set of tools the Buddha offers to help your discernment understand how emotions are formed and how craving turns them into streams that can sweep you away.

THAT SET OF TOOLS is the analysis of mind-states into three sorts of fabrication, or *sankhāra:* bodily, verbal, and mental.

- Bodily fabrication is the in-and-out breath.
- Verbal fabrication is the way you talk to yourself. In formal terms, it's divided into two activities: directed thought, which chooses a topic to focus on; and evaluation, which asks questions and makes comments on the topic.
- Mental fabrication consists of perceptions—the labels the mind places on things, either as phrases or images—and feelings of either pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain (MN 44).

All three of these types of fabrication play a role in developing concentration. When you're mindful of the breath, for instance, the breath itself is bodily fabrication. And in the Buddha's instructions for mindfulness of breathing, after you get acquainted with the breath and can breathe sensitive to the entire body, you try to "calm bodily fabrication" (MN 118). In other words, you breathe in a way that has an increasingly soothing effect inside. To do this, you need to engage in verbal fabrication, to talk to yourself about how best to breathe so as to give rise to a sense of ease, how to maintain it, and how to let it spread throughout the body. The ease, of course, is a pleasant type of feeling, a mental fabrication that will have a positive effect on the mind. At the same time, you need to hold in mind a perception of the breath and its relation to the body in order to stay with the breath and to spread the ease throughout the body. As you work at this process, you'll find that different ways of picturing the breath and body to yourself will have different effects on both body and mind. And as the

Buddha recommends, you try to find feelings and perceptions that will help bring the mind to a state of calm.

This is how breath meditation, as you master it, makes you familiar with these three types of fabrication. And when you're familiar with them, you begin to see in daily life how they fashion all your mind-states, and in particular afflictive emotions. When you're angry, for instance, a perception —a mental image—is what usually sets you off. This is followed by an internal verbal commentary, in which you focus on what aggravates your anger and generate reasons for why the anger is justified. All of this will have an effect on the breath, which changes its rhythm and flow, creating a feeling of tightness or constriction, say, in your stomach or your chest. And when the thought gets into the body like this, it becomes an emotion that you feel you have to get out of your system.

The same processes go into creating emotions of greed, anxiety, or lust.

The practice of breath meditation not only helps to familiarize you with these processes, but also teaches you two important practical lessons about them. The first is that they don't always happen just in reaction to events outside. You often bring them *to* the events. In other words, you prime yourself to be angry, lustful, or greedy even before you make contact with anything that aggravates these emotions. All too often, the mind is out looking for trouble: This is why there's hate radio, online shopping, and Internet porn. Electronic devices don't turn themselves on. We turn them on to stoke the emotions we're already fabricating. This may be why the Buddha describes emotions not only as streams, but also as effluents: They go flowing out, spreading their pollution into the world.

The second practical lesson is that although these processes are influenced by your past habits, you can consciously change them. As the Buddha said, if it weren't possible to abandon unskillful habits and develop skillful ones in their place, he wouldn't have bothered to teach. In fact, many of his teachings deal in examples of how to dismantle unskillful habits of fabrication and to replace them with more skillful ones. His breath meditation instructions are shorthand tips for how to skillfully work with bodily fabrication even when you're not sitting on a cushion or under a tree. His extended teachings are examples of skillful verbal fabrication; his many images and similes, examples of skillful mental fabrications that you can use to replace the unskillful ones that rule your mind. Ultimately, of course, his

instructions take you to a dimension of the mind that's free from fabrication, but to get there, you first have to learn how to create skillful bodily, verbal, and mental fabrications to free yourself from your old unskillful habits.

In terms of mental fabrication, for instance, the Buddha recommends ways of perceiving the drawbacks of anger and lust so that you can use those perceptions to counteract any perceptions you might have that anger and lust are attractive, or make you strong and brave. His list of perceptions to apply to lust includes the perception that a person engaged in lustful thoughts is like a dog chewing on a bone: It gets no nourishment or taste, aside from the taste of its own saliva. Getting lustfully involved with other people is like using borrowed goods: If the owners take them back, you have no grounds for complaint, because they're simply taking what's really theirs (MN 54). Learning to perceive lust in this way gives you a toehold in the idea that you'd be better off trying to go beyond it.

As for anger, the Buddha details ways in which all three types of fabrication can be brought to bear to dismantle bouts of anger and replace them with something more wise. Say you're feeling angry about something your boss has done. The Buddha provides a good verbal fabrication to interrupt the inner chatter that's provoking your anger: If you act on your anger, you're going to do or say something stupid. Do you really want to do that? If your anger is really insistent, and you see the boss as your enemy, the Buddha recommends something stronger to counteract it, verging on spite: Do you want to give your enemy the satisfaction of seeing you act stupidly? (AN 7:60) If the answer in either case is No, you've got to get a handle on your anger so that you can think clearly enough to come up with a genuinely useful response to the situation.

Then you look at your bodily fabrication: How are you breathing? Can you calm the breath so that, at the very least, you're not developing a tight knot in your chest that stokes the anger? When the breath calms down, you've got both bodily fabrication and a part of mental fabrication—a feeling of inner ease—on your side.

Then you look at the other part of mental fabrication: What images of the boss and of yourself are you holding in mind? Do you perceive yourself as being victimized and weak in the face of the boss? If so, the Buddha recommends that you perceive your goodwill as being as solid and large as

the Earth. People can dig in the Earth or spit on it or urinate on it, but they can't make it be without earth. Perceive your goodwill as large and cool, like the river Ganges. Perceive your mind as being like space: Just as no one can leave a mark on space, you want to tap into a mind-state where none of your boss's actions leave a mark (MN 21).

And how about the boss? How do you perceive him? As a monster? An idiot? If you're going to try to speak skillfully with him, you've got to develop some sympathy for him. Otherwise, you'll be like the two lady poodles in the old *New Yorker* carton. They're sitting at a bar, drinking Martinis, looking bitter and mean, and one of them says, "They're all sons of bitches"—the message being that if you see everyone as bitches or sons of bitches, that's how you'll treat them. And you'll become one, too.

So you've got to change your perception. Perceive yourself as a person going across a desert—hot, tired, trembling with thirst—and you come across a small puddle of water in the hoof print of a cow. If you tried to scoop the water up, you'd make it muddy. To drink it, you have to get down on all fours and carefully slurp it up. That's the image the Buddha gives. It's not very dignified—you wouldn't want anyone to come along and snap a picture of you at that moment—but it's what you've got to do if you want to survive.

What this means is that even though your boss may be extremely foolish, you've got to look carefully for the water of his good points, even if they seem to be surrounded by mud. You may feel that it's beneath your dignity, that he doesn't deserve your goodwill, but the image reminds you that *you* need your goodwill for your goodness to survive. You're in no position to be careless in your judgment of people. Otherwise, you'll do or say something that you may later regret for a long time. So you look for the water of the boss's good qualities, even though it may not be much, to help water your own determination not to give in to your anger.

If, on reflection, you can't think of anything good the boss has ever said or done, the Buddha recommends another perception: You're coming across a desert and you find someone sick lying on the side of the road, with no one to help him. No matter who that person is, you'd have to feel compassion for him (AN 5:162). In the same way, if the boss is totally unskillful, you have to feel pity for the bad karma he's creating for himself. With that perception in mind, you can better trust yourself to find

something skillful and effective to do or say.

THESE WAYS of refabricating your experience—deconstructing unskillful emotions and constructing skillful ones in their place—are not the ultimate solution to the problem of afflictive emotions. They don't put a stop to the streams. They simply dam them and divert them in a better direction. But they give you a handle on them, so that you don't have to choose simply between giving in to them or bottling them up. And more importantly, as you develop skill in this direction, your dams get closer and closer to the source of the streams, and closer and closer to discerning what pushes them out in the first place. As the Buddha says, only discernment can stop them, and you don't really discern a mind-state until you see three things: its allure, its drawbacks, and the escape from it (MN 14).

This is in line with his analysis of why we cling to things in the first place, and how we can learn how not to cling. If things didn't offer pleasure, they'd hold no allure and we wouldn't cling to them. If things weren't also painful, we wouldn't be able to see that they aren't worth clinging to (SN 22:60). This means that we cling as long as we see that the pleasure they offer is well worth the pain of holding on. This is true no matter how much we tell ourselves that the emotions are impermanent or empty of inherent existence. After all, we cling to food and sex knowing full well that they're not permanent and have no inherent essence—in fact, knowing their impermanence makes us cling all the more. Only when we see that the pleasure these things offer isn't worth the effort that goes into clinging to them will we be willing to let go. And because that pleasure isn't abstract, abstract solutions—like calling to mind the ultimate nature of reality—won't really work. Only when we see the particulars of why we find our afflictive emotions alluring, and can compare that allure with the particulars of their drawbacks, will we be willing to let them go.

So, strategically, the best way to see the allure of an unskillful emotion—what you think you get out of going for it—is to keep thwarting it, and then to look and listen for any leaks in the dam of mindfulness you've set up. The emotion will look for moments of weakness, to insinuate itself back into favor, and will continue to give you reasons for why you should want it back. But as you keep rejecting its reasons, strengthened by the skillful ways you can refabricate it, it'll have to become more and more frank about why it still wants to be free to flow in the mind.

And here again, the Buddha's analysis of mind-states into the three types of fabrication helps give you some clues for where to look for the leaks in your dam. As he notes, our craving for an object or activity isn't always focused on the object or activity itself. It's often focused on our mental or verbal fabrications around it (DN 22). Our craving for a person may be focused, not on the person, but on the perceptions and thoughts we embroider around the person—or around our perception of ourselves in relation to the person. The same goes for our greed for things, which is why advertisers put so much effort into selling, not their products, but the stories and moods they want you associate with their products. As for our craving for anger, it may be focused on the verbal fabrications that justify the anger—we think we're clever in the way we think, so we'll keep on thinking that way regardless of how much harm it brings in its wake. And we can even have craving for craving itself.

So you look to see precisely where your craving is focused, for that's where the allure of the emotion will be found. And as you stay determined not to fall for it, there will come a moment of truth, where the mind totally opens up about why it likes its unskillful emotions. When you see the real reason, you'll also realize that it's thoroughly stupid—in no way at all worth the drawbacks that those emotions can cause.

This means that genuine insight is a value judgment. And the proof that it's genuine lies in the fact that, unlike your earlier, less skillful judgments, it opens the mind to the total escape of all-around dispassion.

Dispassion may sound like aversion or dullness, but it's not. It's more like a maturing, a sobering up. Your old ways seem childish, and now you're ready to grow up. And because passion is what's been driving all processes of fabrication, both good and bad, all along, this dispassion is what eventually frees you from everything flowing in the mind.

This is where you realize that true freedom lies, not in allowing the mind to stream wherever it wants, but in no longer being pushed around by those streams. And one of the side benefits of this freedom is that the mind no longer has to lie to itself. It can be frank to itself about its actions and their results.

It's the freedom of causing no harm, and of having nothing to hide inside.

Worlds & Their Cessation

The Buddha's Strategic View of the Cosmos

Recently, while teaching a retreat sponsored by a vipassanā group in Brazil, I happened to mention devas and rebirth. The response was swift. The next morning, as I was looking through the slips of paper left in the question box, two questions stood out. The first was a complaint: "Why do we have to listen to this supernatural stuff? I don't believe in anything except for the natural world I can see with my own eyes." The second was a complaint of a different sort: "Why are Western Buddhist teachers so afraid to talk about the supernatural side of the Buddhist tradition?"

To answer the second question, all I had to do was point to the first. "It's because of questions like these. They scare teachers away from the topic." I might have added that there's an irony here. In an effort to be tolerant, the early generation of Western Buddhist teachers admitted dogmatic materialists into their ranks, but these materialists have proven very intolerant of the supernatural teachings attributed to the Buddha. If he was really awakened, they say, he wouldn't have taught such things.

To answer the first question, though, I asked a question in return: "How do you know that the natural world is real? Maybe what you see with your eyes is all an illusion. What we *do* know, though, is that suffering is real. Some people have the kamma to experience supernatural events; others, the kamma to experience only natural events. But whatever the range of the world you experience, you can create real suffering around it, so that's what the Buddha's teaching focuses on. He's got a cure for suffering regardless."

Here I could have added even more. The awakening that goes beyond suffering also goes beyond all worldviews, but the path leading to that awakening requires that you adopt a provisional sense of the world in which human action has the power to bring suffering to an end. This is the same pattern the Buddha adopts with regard to views about the self: Awakening lies beyond all views of the self, but it requires adopting, provisionally, a sense of your self as responsible and competent to follow the path.

The parallel way the Buddha treats these two issues comes from the fact

that "self" and "world" go together. In his analysis, suffering arises in the process of becoming *(bhava),* which means the act of taking on a sense of self in a particular world of experience. This becoming comes from craving. When we cling to a craving, we create a sense of self, both the self-as-consumer who, we hope, will enjoy the attainment of what we crave, and the self-as-producer who does or doesn't possess the skills to attain it. At the same time, the self needs a world in which to function to satisfy its cravings. So we fashion a view of the world as it's relevant to that particular desire: what will help or hinder our self in our quest for what we want.

These worlds can be strictly imaginary scenarios in the mind—in which case there are very few constraints on the shapes they can take—but they also include the world(s) in which we function as human beings. And in cases like this, there *are* constraints: The human world, when you push on it, often pushes back. It doesn't always respond easily to what you want, and is sometimes firm in its resistance. As we look for happiness, we have to figure out how to read its pushback. When we gain a sense of what can and can't rightly be expected out of how the world works, we can adjust our cravings to get the most out of what the world has to offer. At the same time, we adjust our sense of self, developing skills to fit in with the world so that we can produce happiness more easily, and consume it more frequently.

This is why our sense of self is so intimately tied to our sense of the world—and why people can get so incensed about the differing worldviews of others. If we feel that they're trying to get away with things that our own worldview doesn't allow, we're offended because they're not playing by the rules to which we've submitted. Some of the people who are convinced that the world has no supernatural dimension feel that people whose worldview allows for the supernatural are trying to get away with magical thinking. Some whose worldview *does* have room for the supernatural—and who find in that dimension the source of their values—are upset by people whose materialist/naturalist views allow them to operate in a world unrestrained by any objective moral law.

These battles have been going on for millennia. The Pāli Canon—the earliest extant record of the Buddha's teachings—shows that they were already raging at his time. Several long discourses are devoted to the wide variety of worldviews the Buddha's contemporaries advocated, and if anything, people in India at that time had a greater variety of worldviews than we do now. Some maintained that the world and the self were purely

material; others, that there was a soul that remained the same forever; others, that the soul and the world were identical; and still others, that the soul perished at death. Some argued that moral laws were just a convention; others, that a moral law was built into the cosmos. Some believed that the world had a creator; others believed that it arose by chance; others, that it has existed without any beginning point at all. Some believed in other realms of being—heavens and hells—while others did not. Some believed in rebirth, while others did not. Some believed in a finite cosmos, some in an infinite cosmos, some in a cosmos that was both or neither. The list could go on and on.

The Buddha's response to these controversies was interesting. Instead of jumping into the fray to debate these issues, he focused first on the kamma of building a worldview: what kinds of actions led to a particular view, and what kinds of actions that worldview would inspire. He then judged these actions as to whether they resulted in more suffering or less. Only then did he decide which features were required by a provisional worldview that would lead to suffering's end.

His approach was very wise. Arguments over worldviews boil down to questions of inference: what kind of facts can be judged to be real, and what ways of inferring a world from those facts can be judged to be valid. And where do we get our facts? We learn about the world by acting in it. We learn about walls by bumping into them; about people, by trying to get what we want from them. Then, from the results of our actions, we infer more about the world than our actions actually tell us. There's a lot more to the world than the parts that respond to our actions, and our inferences fill in the blanks. So the Buddha, instead of giving reality to the inferences, decided to focus on their source: our actions. After all, we know them—or should know them, if we're paying attention—much more directly than the worlds we've inferred.

His conclusion was that all possible worldviews were instances of clinging, and that clinging, in turn, was suffering. Just as we suffer in the activity of what the Buddha called I-making and my-making, we suffer in the process of world-making. Even though we feed off these activities —"feeding" being another meaning for *upādāna,* the Pāli word for clinging— we end up having to pay dearly for what we eat. This is true whether our sense of the world has a supernatural aspect or not.

Now, these worldview-clingings have two dimensions. On the one hand, they focus on five things, called aggregates *(khandha):*

the body as it moves around in the world;
feelings of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain;
perceptions, the labels we apply to things;
fabrications, the way we put our thoughts together; and
consciousness, our awareness at the six senses.

On the other hand, these clingings can take four forms:

view clinging, the act of holding to a view of the world;
doctrine-of-self clinging, the sense of "you" that functions in that worldview along with the sense of "you" as the person who is proud to espouse that view;
habit-and-practice clinging, a sense of how things have to be done, both in shaping and defending a worldview and then, once it's shaped, how you have to act in the context of the rules of that worldview; and
sensuality clinging, fascination with the sensual pleasures that a worldview has to offer.

It's easy to see how this analysis of clinging applies to worldviews that have no supernatural aspect as well as to those that do. For example, in terms of the self holding the view, "naturalists" can be very proud that they're hard-headed realists; "supernaturalists," very proud that they've been singled out for privileged information. In terms of habits and practices, each side can be very insistent that the way they draw inferences about the world is "scientific"—as they define the term—and that they know for a fact what ways of behavior are actually valid in the context of their worlds.

From the Buddha's point of view, though, all these ways of clinging are suffering. And the wise task with regard to suffering is to comprehend it—which means to see how it's caused, how it passes away, what its allure is, what its drawbacks are, and finally how to escape from it through the dispassion that comes from seeing that the drawbacks far outweigh the allure.

Mundane Right View

To comprehend clinging and suffering in this way is not simply an intellectual exercise. It requires developing all eight factors of the noble path, an all-around skill that grows in many stages. This path requires a strong sense that there are such things as skillful and unskillful actions. It also requires a resilient sense of motivation that can carry you through the setbacks and obstacles in developing, among other skills, strong mindfulness and concentration. All of this, especially as you're getting started on the path, requires a certain sense of the world to explain the path and to affirm why it's a possible and desirable course of action.

Which is why the Buddha doesn't simply recommend dropping all views about the world. As he notes in DN 1, taking a stance of agnosticism toward all issues deprives you of any grounds for deciding what's skillful and not. When you're deprived in that way, you're open to doing unskillful things that will yield bad long-term consequences. So, instead of dropping views about the world, he recommends—in the form of mundane right view (MN 117)—a provisional sketch of the world that serves the purposes of the path to the end of suffering, one in which that path is both possible and desirable. In other words, he's giving you something relatively skillful to cling to until you reach the level of skill where you no longer need to cling. At the same time, he recommends overcoming I-making and my-making by starting first with the step of developing, provisionally, a healthy sense of self capable of following the path (AN 4:159). Only when these senses of the world and of the self have served their purpose do you put them aside.

Note, in both cases, that he's recommending just a *sense* of self and a *sense* of world, not a full-blown view about either self or world. As he saw, the path requires just a small body of assumptions, enough to act as working hypotheses that point you in the right direction. In terms of the self, the Buddha discouraged his monks from trying to answer such questions as "What am I?" "Do I exist?" "Do I not exist?" (MN 2). Instead, it's enough to develop and use a sense of self that's responsible and competent as a producer (Dhp 160), and who feels enough self-love to want only the best happiness for the self as a consumer (AN 3:40). In terms of the world, the Buddha refused to take a position on whether or not the world was eternal or infinite (MN 63). He also discouraged his followers from engaging in speculation about the world, saying that it would lead to "madness and vexation" (AN 4:77). In fact, he never gave a complete picture even of a "Buddhist cosmology." The maps detailing the many levels of the Buddhist

cosmos were later extrapolations from comments scattered in the early texts. What he did offer was just a handful of leaves (SN 56:31).

A prominent leaf in that handful was a view of the world in which the mind's acts of fabrication play an important role. On one level, this is eminently sensible. Given the effort that goes into constructing worldviews, why bother fabricating a worldview, as some people do, in which the mind's activities play no effective role—in which they're regarded as nothing more than after-effects of physical events, for example, or denied any reality at all? (DN 2) It'd be a senseless waste of time.

But the Buddha's purposes were more specific than just common sense. The path to the end of suffering requires a view of the world in which:

suffering is real,

the mind's fabrications, under the power of ignorance, are the cause of suffering, and

those same fabrications, when treated with knowledge, have the power to bring suffering to an end.

This means, as a preliminary principle, that the Buddha's provisional worldview could not be purely materialistic. He established this point with the line that his followers posted in the first line of the Dhammapada: "The heart/mind is the forerunner of all phenomena." With this line, the Buddha rejected the worldview in which the mind is simply the passive recipient of sense data, or in which its functions are nothing more than the after-effects of physical processes. In a materialist universe, the problem of suffering wouldn't rightly be regarded as a problem, because it can't be detected by material mechanisms. And even if a materialist were inconsistent enough to want to do away with suffering, he'd explain it as a material problem, to be solved through material means, such as chemicals or electric shock. The principle that the mind comes first, however, allows for suffering to be regarded as a genuine problem, and that it might potentially be solved by training the mind's fabrications.

This is why the main leaf in the Buddha's worldview is that the processes of fabrication are real. Unlike some later Buddhist theorists, such as Nāgārjuna, the Buddha stated clearly that fabrications—even though they're conditioned, inconstant, and subject to change—really do exist (SN 22:94). If they weren't real, the suffering they create also wouldn't be real, and there would be no point to teaching a path to the end of suffering.

But fabrications are not simply real. They are *the* dominant factor in shaping not only our views about the world, but also the structure of the world, the events we experience within that structure, and the way we experience those events.

In giving fabrications such a large role to play in shaping the world, the Buddha is also implying that the world shares the limitations of fabrications. Like them, it's inconstant, stressful, and subject to change. No permanent happiness can be found within its confines. This is the main motivation for wanting to get out of it.

But when we examine the Buddha's picture of how fabrications construct the world, we find that he also gives them a prominent role in providing the way out. To take on that role, though, the mind has to accept certain assumptions to guide it in fabricating the path. The Buddha set out these assumptions in the provisional sketch of the world that he called mundane right view. The assumptions are these:

> there is generosity—i.e., the act of generosity is a choice (this principle denies strict determinism);
> actions are real;
> there are the results of good and bad actions;
> there are beings;
> some beings, such as your parents, deserve gratitude;
> there is a world after death;
> there are, in some of those worlds, spontaneously reborn beings—i.e., beings in the heavens, hells, and realm of the hungry ghosts, who, based on their kamma, arise without parents; and
> there are contemplatives who, practicing rightly, have come to know these things as facts.

These are all principles to be taken on conviction. Some people ask how one can be expected to know these things before accepting them, but that's missing the point. These principles are explicitly labeled as right *views,* rather than right knowledge. You're not expected to know them at the beginning of the path. They're working hypotheses, "right" because they're right for the job: They lead you to act in a way that will lead to the end of suffering. Only at the moment of full awakening are they replaced with right knowledge.

The Buddha realized that he couldn't prove these principles to an

unawakened audience, but he did provide a pragmatic test: By accepting these principles, you're more likely to engage in skillful actions than if you accepted their opposites. That much is easy to see. Of course, a willingness to accept the principle that views can be tested by putting them into action requires at least some confidence that actions can be chosen and have the power to yield differing results. But the Buddha wasn't interested in teaching people whose minds weren't open enough to accept at least this much.

The discourses add some details to the worldview sketched out in mundane right view. In terms of action, AN 3:62 rejects any worldviews in which all experience of pleasure and pain can be attributed to previous actions, to the will of a creator god, or to pure chance. As the Buddha points out, such views don't provide any grounds for claiming that there's a difference between skillful and unskillful actions, or that there could be such a thing as a path of practice.

The Buddha's provisional worldview also makes reference to heavens, hells, and rebirth. This means that his concept of nature contained what we would call a supernatural dimension. But it's worth noting:

• that his sketch of the cosmos, as revealed in the discourses, was not simply picked up from the worldviews of previous Indian religions; and

• that he deprived the supernatural dimension of the authority it enjoyed in other religions of the time.

To begin with, his view of kamma, and of the places where beings can go after death, was distinctively his own. Compared to previous thinkers, he gave a much larger role to kamma in shaping both the process of rebirth and the worlds to which beings are reborn. Those worlds, especially in his sketch of the higher heavens, correspond to what he learned about the levels of the mind that he encountered in the course of bringing his mind to awakening. Although he affirmed the existence of some of the devas taught in the Vedas, the structure of his cosmos puts them in their place, in both senses of the term. In other words, they are demoted to the lower heavens and sharply downsized in importance. Even the Great Brahmā, the highest god in the brahmanical pantheon, is assigned to a middling level of heaven, reigning there over the ignorant, not because of any innate greatness, but because he exhausted the merit that would have allowed him to stay on a higher level (DN 1). This means that the Buddha's audience would have

found his worldview just as novel and strange as Western audiences do now.

It's also worth noting the serious constraints he put on the value of knowing the supernatural. Even though, as he stated, full knowledge of devas was a necessary part of his own awakening (AN 8:71), it wasn't necessary for everyone. He needed it because, without that knowledge, he couldn't have taught people whose kamma led them to experience devas in their own meditation. But what he learned about the devas was that they can be very unreliable. Instead of coming in just two varieties—angels and demons—they come in all gradations of goodness and potency. And they're not always emissaries from a higher power, either evil or good. Knowing these facts helps to protect a person who has visions of such beings, or who encounters them through mediums, from being overly fearful of them or giving them too much confidence.

Some devas have a good sense of the Dhamma (MN 134; SN 9:14), some don't (SN 1:20), and even those who do can be fickle in sharing their knowledge (SN 9:14). Some, like Māra, are hungry for power. Others are downright corrupt—see the origin story to Pārājika 3 for a chilling example of a deva who gives evil advice. Devas who claim to be creators of the universe are especially hypocritical and ignorant (DN 1; DN 11).

What all this means is that the supernatural knowledge coming from devas—what they tell you about the cosmos, for example, about how to act, or about the meaning of life—can't always be trusted.

Similarly with psychic powers: The Buddha mastered a wide range of such powers on the way to his awakening, and he continued to use them in the course of his teaching career (MN 86). But he warned any monks who had such powers not to display them to the laity (Cv.V.8). As he explained in DN 11, the display of psychic powers is always open to suspicions of trickery, whereas a Dhamma that, when put into practice, shows results is the only proof of a teacher's truthfulness. Several stories of psychic powers in the Canon show that they attract the wrong kind of attention from others (see the origin story to NP 23), and the case of Devadatta shows how a monk with psychic powers can actually use those powers to cause harm.

So even though the Buddha's provisional view of the world has a supernatural dimension, he places some very sensible restrictions on how much that dimension can be trusted. This fact is reflected in two important

points:

• Even though the Buddha's awakening required gaining psychic powers and knowledge of devas, the full awakening of his students does not (SN 12:70).

• In judging whether teachers are to be trusted, their lack or possession of such powers doesn't enter into the equation at all. Instead, they should be observed to see if they possess two very natural virtues: They wouldn't tell a person to do something that would lead to that person's harm; and they wouldn't claim knowledge that they don't possess (MN 95). In other words, teachers are to be judged by their actions, to see if they're reliable guides on how to act.

After all, this is the main thrust of the Buddha's provisional worldview: the role of action in shaping the world. If teachers don't act with truthfulness and compassion, you can't trust them to teach you how to act wisely and skillfully with regard to the world. And skill is precisely what you need to learn how to master. Actions have the power to lead to a wide range of becomings—from the purely painful ones in hell to the purely blissful ones in the higher heavens. This is because the cravings that drive the mind to act can also drive it to being reborn (SN 44:9)—a process that comes from an inconceivable beginning (SN 15:3), and can, potentially, recur without end.

And the process doesn't go ever upward. After reaching the higher levels, beings easily become careless and irresponsible, clinging to the results of their past good kamma, and so fall. And because the cosmos is shaped by the actions of many beings, there's no one being in charge of the process. It has no purpose, and—in the words of MN 82—it's "without shelter, without protector." This means that the suffering experienced in all these ups and downs serves no higher purpose, either. It's pointless.

But the Buddha's provisional worldview does have a point: to develop a sense of dismay at the idea of continuing to stay in this world of fabrications, along with a sense of confidence that, if action has caused this problem, action can find the way out. And because the source of the problem is in the mind, the solution has to lie there as well. As the Buddha says to a former "sky-walker" in AN 4:45, there's no way that an end to the cosmos, free from suffering, can be reached by traveling, but it can be reached by looking inward, into the body together with its mind. This is

where the cosmos, the origination of the cosmos, the cessation of the cosmos, and the path leading to the cessation of the cosmos can be found.

When the mind shifts its frame of reference to this perspective, it moves its right views from the mundane level to the transcendent.

Transcendent Right View

Mundane right view and transcendent right view both focus on the same topic—the mind's fabrications—but they treat that topic from different angles. Mundane right view treats it in terms of beings and worlds. Transcendent right view drops those terms entirely and treats the processes of fabrication *as* processes, analyzed in terms of the four noble truths: suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. This level of right view doesn't deny the existence of beings or worlds. Instead, it simply changes to another frame of reference: fabrications within the mind, taken on their own terms. With regard to suffering, the question isn't who in the world is suffering, who caused the suffering, or who's going to put an end to suffering. It's simply, what actions constitute suffering, what actions cause it, what actions bring it to an end. From this perspective, a distinctive duty is applied to events falling under each truth: suffering is to be comprehended, its cause abandoned, its cessation realized, and the path to its cessation developed.

By adopting this perspective, you can see even your sense of self and your sense of the world simply as actions. You then ask which of the four categories of right view these actions fall into, and apply the appropriate duty. When you regard something as "yours" or as a duty imposed by the world, it's hard to let it go. But when you see it simply as an action under the rubric of the four noble truths, it's easier to apply the appropriate duty. You see that views are forms of clinging, so you try to comprehend them. You see that they come from craving, so you try to let that craving go.

But because the mind is so used to thinking in terms of beings and worlds, this new perspective is hard to hold in mind. It keeps slipping back to its old ways of thinking. This is why right mindfulness—the ability to remember the right frame of reference and the duties implied by that frame—is an essential part of the path. The basic formula for right mindfulness starts by telling you to keep track of the body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities in and of themselves. In other words, you view these raw materials

for a state of becoming on their own terms, without putting them in the context of "self" or "world"—how, for instance, your body is viewed by the world or how it fits into your self-image vis-à-vis the world.

The formula then notes that you keep subduing any greed or distress with reference to the world. In other words, you drop any thoughts that deal in terms of "world" that would pull you out of your frame of reference.

The formula also notes that you develop three qualities to keep with the right frame of reference:

- mindfulness, remembering your frame of reference along with the duties appropriate to the four noble truths;
- alertness, the ability to see clearly what you are doing in the present; and
- ardency, the effort to apply the appropriate duty to whatever is coming up in the context of your frame of reference.

Maintaining this practice over time would become a dry, tiring exercise if it weren't for the fact that these "establishings of mindfulness" *(satipaṭṭhāna)* lead the mind to right concentration, which is suffused with pleasure and rapture. As long as the mind doesn't get distracted by the world outside, it can find a strong sense of well-being by developing this new perspective.

In the beginning stages of right mindfulness, the work of subduing greed and distress with reference to the world focuses on thoughts that would pull you to engage in the world outside. But with time, you come to see the world more and more in the Buddha's "noble" definition of the term: the six senses, their objects, consciousness at the senses, contact at the senses, and all the feelings that arise based on that contact (SN 35:82). In other words, you get less interested in extrapolating an outside world from these processes, and more interested in simply bringing knowledge to these processes in and of themselves. In this way, you bring the world into the context of the four establishings of mindfulness themselves, and under the framework of the four noble truths. The meditation is now not something that happens in the context of the world; the world happens in the context of the meditation. This doesn't mean that the world outside is an illusion, just that you realize that it's not the problem. The problem lies in the processes of the mind.

SN 12:15 shows where this practice leads: As you watch the origination of the "world" in the sense of processes, you reach a state of mind in which the thought of "existence" with regard to the world simply doesn't occur to you. As you watch the cessation of the world of processes, the thought of "non-existence" with regard to the world doesn't occur to you, either. You see the processes of arising and passing away as mere instances of stress arising and passing away. Because these processes have no further value in terms of "world" or "self," "existence" or not, you can let them all go. And in letting them go, the mind lets go of everything that's fabricated and caused, that arises and passes away. That's how it gains release.

MN 49 describes the state of consciousness revealed in this release as "consciousness without surface," a consciousness that—unlike the consciousness-aggregate—is not experienced through the six senses at all. In other words, it's not engaged in any world in any sense of the term. DN 11 adds that it's free from name and form, which means that—unlike, say, the infinitude of consciousness experienced in formless states of concentration—it's not involved in any sort of fabrication. In both of these discourses, this type of consciousness is presented as something that even the devas in the highest heavenly worlds don't know. After all, they're still in their worlds, whereas—in the words of DN 11—this consciousness is where no world finds a footing. It's the world's cessation.

The image used in SN 12:64 is of a light beam that doesn't land on any object. It may be bright in and of itself, but because it doesn't participate in the world in any way, it can't be detected as existing, not existing, both, or neither. Its release is that total.

This is the goal where the Buddha's teachings on the world aim: to a state of mind freed from any world of any kind. In going beyond the world, you find that the Buddha's provisional worldviews were true, as far as they went, but that their genuine worth lies in that they allow the mind to go further than they do. As the Buddha's life story shows, people who have gone beyond worlds in this way can—as long as the body continues to live—still offer guidance and help to those still trapped in worlds, whether those worlds are of a natural or supernatural sort. This is why the Buddha was a teacher of beings not only human, but also divine. But there's something about an awakened person that no world or worldview can capture. And

because the Buddha's worldviews can help those who adopt them to find that "something," that's why they're really worth taking on.

Wisdom over Justice

A few years ago, in one of its more inspired moments, *The Onion* reported a video released by a Buddhist fundamentalist sect in which a spokesman for the sect threatened that he and his cohorts would unleash waves of peace and harmony across the world, waves that no one could stop or resist. The report also noted that, in response to the video, the Department of Homeland Security swore to do everything in its power to stop those waves from reaching America.

As with all good satire, the report makes you stop and think. Why are peace and harmony the worst "threats" that would come from the fundamentals of the Buddha's teachings?

The answer, I think, lies in the fact that the Buddha never tried to impose his ideas of justice on the world at large. And this was very wise and perceptive on his part. It's easy enough to see how imposed standards of justice can be a menace to well-being when those standards are somebody else's. It's much harder to see the menace when the standards are your own.

The Buddha did have clear standards for right and wrong, of skillful and unskillful ways of engaging with the world, but he hardly ever spoke of justice at all. Instead, he spoke of actions that would lead to harmony and true happiness in the world. And instead of explaining his ideas for harmony in the context of pursuing a just world, he presented them in the context of merit: actions that pursue a happiness blameless both in itself and in the way it's pursued.

The concept of merit is widely misunderstood in the West. It's often seen as the selfish quest for your own well-being. Actually, though, the actions that qualify as meritorious are the Buddha's preliminary answer to the set of questions that he says lie at the basis of wisdom: "What is skillful? What is blameless? What, when I do it, will lead to long-term welfare and happiness?" If you search for happiness by means of the three types of meritorious action—generosity, virtue, and the development of universal goodwill—it's hard to see how that happiness could be branded as selfish. These are the actions that, through their inherent goodness, make human society livable.

And the Buddha never imposed even these actions on anyone as commands or obligations. When asked where a gift should be given, instead of saying, "To Buddhists," he said, "Wherever the mind feels confidence" (SN 3:24). Similarly with virtue: Dhamma teachers have frequently noted, with approval, that the Buddha's precepts are not commandments. They're training rules that people can undertake voluntarily. As for the practice of universal goodwill, that's a private matter that can't be forced on anyone at all. To be genuine, it has to come voluntarily from the heart. The only "should" lying behind the Buddha's teachings on merit is a conditional one: *If* you want true happiness, this is what you should do. Not because the Buddha said so, but simply because this is how cause and effect work in the world.

After all, the Buddha didn't claim to speak for a creator god or a protective deity. He wasn't a universal lawgiver. The only laws and standards for fairness he formulated were the rules of conduct for those who chose to be ordained in the Bhikkhu and Bhikkhunī Saṅghas, where those who carry out communal duties are enjoined to avoid any form of bias coming from desire, aversion, delusion, or fear. Apart from that, the Buddha spoke simply as an expert in how to end suffering. His authority came, not from a claim to power, but from the honesty and efficacy of his own search for a deathless happiness.

This meant that he was in no position to impose his ideas on anyone who didn't voluntarily accept them. And he didn't seek to put himself in such a position. As the Pāli Canon notes, the request for the Buddha to assume a position of sovereignty so that he could rule justly over others came, not from any of his followers, but from Māra (SN 4:20). There are several reasons why he refused Māra's request—and why he advised others to refuse such requests as well.

To begin with, even if you tried to rule justly, there would always be people dissatisfied with your rule. As the Buddha commented to Māra, even two mountains of solid gold bullion wouldn't be enough to satisfy the wants of any one person. No matter how well wealth and opportunities were distributed under your rule, there would always be those dissatisfied with their portions. As a result, there would always be those you'd have to fight in order to maintain your power. And, in trying to maintain power, you inevitably develop an attitude where the ends justify the means. Those means can involve violence and punishments, driving you further and

further away from being able to admit the truth, or even wanting to know it (AN 3:70). Even the mere fact of being in a position of power means that you're surrounded by sycophants and schemers, people determined to prevent you from knowing the truth about them (MN 90). As far as the Buddha was concerned, political power was so dangerous that he advised his monks to avoid, if possible, associating with a ruler—one of the dangers being that if the ruler formulated a disastrous policy, the policy might be blamed on the monk (Pc 83).

Another reason for the Buddha's reluctance to try to impose his ideas of justice on others was his perception that the effort to seek justice as an absolute end would run counter to the main goal of his teachings: the ending of suffering and the attainment of a true and blameless happiness. He never tried to prevent rulers from imposing justice in their kingdoms, but he also never used the Dhamma to justify a theory of justice. And he never used the teaching on past kamma to justify the mistreatment of the weak or disadvantaged: Regardless of whatever their past kamma may have been, if you mistreat them, the kamma of mistreatment becomes yours. Just because people are currently weak and poor doesn't mean that their kamma requires them to stay weak and poor. There's no way of knowing, from the outside, what other kammic potentials are waiting to sprout from their past.

At the same time, though, the Buddha never encouraged his followers to seek retribution, i.e., punishment for old wrongs. The conflict between retributive justice and true happiness is well illustrated by the famous story of Aṅgulimāla (MN 86). Aṅgulimāla was a bandit who had killed so many people—the Canon counts at least 100; the Commentary, 999—that he wore a garland *(māla)* made of their fingers *(aṅguli)*. Yet after an encounter with the Buddha, he had such an extreme change of heart that he abandoned his violent ways, awakened a sense of compassion, and eventually became an arahant.

The story is a popular one, and most of us like to identify with Aṅgulimāla: If a person with his history could gain awakening, there's hope for us all. But in identifying with him, we forget the feelings of those he had terrorized and of the relatives of those he had killed. After all, he had literally gotten away with murder. It's easy to understand, then, as the story tells us, that when Aṅgulimāla was going for alms after his awakening, people would throw stones at him, and he'd return from his almsround, "his head broken open and dripping with blood, his bowl broken, and his outer

robe ripped to shreds." As the Buddha reassured him, his wounds were nothing compared to the sufferings he would have undergone if he hadn't reached awakening. And if the outraged people had fully satisfied their thirst for justice, meting out the suffering they thought he deserved, he wouldn't have had the chance to reach awakening at all. So his was a case in which the end of suffering took precedence over justice in any common sense of the word.

Aṅgulimāla's case illustrates a general principle stated in AN 3:101: If the workings of kamma required strict, tit-for-tat justice—with your having to experience the consequences of each act just as you inflicted it on others—there's no way that anyone could reach the end of suffering. The reason we *can* reach awakening is because even though actions of a certain type give a corresponding type of result, the intensity of how that result is felt is determined, not only by the original action, but also—and more importantly—by our state of mind when the results ripen. If you've developed unlimited goodwill and equanimity, and have trained well in virtue, discernment, and the ability to be overcome neither by pleasure nor pain, then when the results of past bad actions ripen, you'll hardly experience them at all. If you haven't trained yourself in these ways, then even the results of a trifling bad act can consign you to hell.

The Buddha illustrates this principle with three similes. The first is the easiest to digest: The results of past bad actions are like a large salt crystal. An untrained mind is like a small cup of water; a well-trained mind, like the water in a large, clear river. If you put the salt into the water of the cup, you can't drink it because it's too salty. But if you put the salt into the river, you can still drink the water because there's so much more of it and it's so clean. All in all, an attractive image.

The other two similes, though, underscore the point that the principle they're illustrating goes against some very basic ideas of fairness. In one simile, the bad action is like the theft of money; in the other, like the theft of a goat. In both similes, the untrained mind is like a poor person who, because he's poor, gets heavily punished for either of these two crimes, whereas the well-trained mind is like the rich person who, because he's rich, doesn't get punished for either theft at all. In these cases, the images are much less attractive, but they drive home the point that, for kamma to work in a way that rewards the training of the mind to put an end to suffering, it can't work in such a way as to guarantee justice. If we insisted on a system

of kamma that *did* guarantee justice, the path to freedom from suffering would be closed.

This set of values, which gives preference to happiness over justice when there's a conflict between the two, doesn't sit very well with many Western Buddhists. "Isn't justice a larger and nobler goal than happiness?" we think. The short answer to this question relates to the Buddha's compassion: Seeing that we've all done wrong in the past, his compassion extended to wrong-doers as well as to those who've been wronged. For this reason, he taught the way to the end of suffering regardless of whether that suffering was "deserved" or not.

For the long answer, though, we have to turn and look at ourselves.

Many of us born and educated in the West, even if we've rejected the monotheism that shaped our culture, tend to hold to the idea that there are objective standards of justice to which everyone should conform. When distressed over the unfair state of society, we often express our views for righting wrongs, not as suggestions of wise courses of action, but as objective standards as to how everyone is duty-bound to act. We tend to forget, though, that the very idea that those standards could be objective and universally binding makes sense only in the context of a monotheistic worldview: one in which the universe was created at a specific point in time —say, by Abraham's God or by Aristotle's Unmoved Mover—with a specific purpose. In other words, we maintain the idea of objective justice even though we've abandoned the worldview that underpins the idea and makes it valid.

For example, retributive justice—the justice that seeks to right old wrongs by punishing the first wrongdoer and/or those who responded excessively to the first wrong—demands a specific beginning point in time so that we can determine who threw the first stone and tally up the score of who did what after that first provocation.

Restorative justice—the justice that seeks to return situations to their proper state before the first stone was thrown—requires not only a specific beginning point in time, but also that that beginning point be a good place to which to return.

Distributive justice—the justice that seeks to determine who should have what, and how resources and opportunities should be redistributed from those who have them to those who *should* have them—requires a common

source, above and beyond individuals, from which all things flow and that sets the purposes those things should serve.

Only when their respective conditions are met can these forms of justice be objective and binding on all. In the Buddha's worldview, though, none of these conditions hold. People have tried to import Western ideas of objective justice into the Buddha's teachings—some have even suggested that this will be one of the great Western contributions to Buddhism, filling in a serious lack—but there is no way that those ideas can be forced on the Dhamma without doing serious damage to the Buddhist worldview. This fact, in and of itself, has prompted many people to advocate jettisoning the Buddhist worldview and replacing it with something closer to one of our own. But a careful look at that worldview, and the consequences that the Buddha drew from it, shows that the Buddha's teachings on how to find social harmony without recourse to objective standards of justice has much to recommend it.

THE BUDDHA DEVELOPED HIS WORLDVIEW from the three knowledges he gained on the night of his awakening.

In the first knowledge, he saw his own past lives, back for thousands and thousands of eons, repeatedly rising and falling through many levels of being and through the evolution and collapse of many universes. As he later said, the beginning point of the process—called *saṁsāra,* the "wandering-on"—was inconceivable. Not just unknowable, inconceivable.

In the second knowledge, he saw that the process of death and rebirth applied to all beings in the universe, and that—because it had gone on so long—it would be hard to find a person who had never been your mother, father, brother, sister, son, or daughter in the course of that long, long time. He also saw that the process was powered by all the many actions of all the many beings, and that it serves the designs of no one being in particular. As one Dhamma summary has it, "There is no one in charge" (MN 82). This means that the universe serves no clear or singular purpose. What's more, it has the potential to continue without end. Unlike a monotheistic universe, with its creator passing final judgment, saṁsāra offers no prospect of a fair or just closure—or even, apart from nibbāna, any closure at all.

In the context of these knowledges, it's hard to regard the pursuit of justice as an absolute good, for three main reasons.

• To begin with, given the lesson of the salt crystal—that people suffer more from their mind-state in the present than they do from the results of past bad actions playing out in the external world—no matter how much justice you try to bring into the world, people are still going to suffer and be dissatisfied as long as their minds are untrained in the qualities that make them impervious to suffering. This was why the Buddha, in rejecting Māra's request, made the comment about the two mountains of solid gold. Not only do people suffer when their minds are untrained, the qualities of an untrained mind also lead them to destroy any system of justice that might be established in the world. As long as people's minds are untrained, justice would not solve the problem of their suffering, nor would it be able to last. This fact holds regardless of whether you adopt the Buddha's view of the world or a more modern view of a cosmos with vast dimensions of time and no end in sight.

• Second, as noted above, the idea of a just resolution of a conflict requires a story with a clear beginning point—and a clear end point. But in the long time frame of the Buddha's universe, the stories have no clear beginning and—potentially—no end. There's no way to determine who did what first, through all our many lifetimes, and there's no way that a final tally would ever stay final. Everything is swept away, only to regroup, again and again. This means that justice cannot be viewed as an end, for in this universe there *are* no ends, aside from nibbāna. You can't use justice as an end to justify means, for it—like everything else in the universe—is nothing but means. Harmony can be found only by making sure that the means are clearly good.

• Third, for people to agree on a standard of justice, they have to agree on the stories that justify the use of force to right wrongs. But in a universe where the boundaries of stories are impossible to establish, there's no story that everyone will agree on. This means that the stories have to be imposed—a fact that holds even if you don't accept the premises of kamma and rebirth. The result is that the stories, instead of uniting us, tend to divide us: Think of all the religious and political wars, the revolutions and counter-revolutions, that have started over conflicting stories of who did what to whom and why. The arguments over whose stories to believe can lead to passions,

conflicts, and strife that, from the perspective of the Buddha's awakening, keep us bound to the suffering in saṁsāra long into the future.

These are some of the reasons why, after gaining his first two knowledges on the night of awakening, the Buddha decided that the best use of what he had learned was to turn inward to find the causes of saṁsāra in his own heart and mind, and to escape from kamma entirely by training his mind. These are also the reasons why, when he taught others how to solve the problem of suffering, he focused primarily on the internal causes of suffering, and only secondarily on the external ones.

THIS DOESN'T MEAN, though, that there's no room in the Buddha's teachings for efforts to address issues of social injustice. After all, the Buddha himself would, on occasion, describe the conditions for social peace and harmony, along with the rewards that come from helping the disadvantaged. However, he always subsumed his social teachings under the larger framework of his teachings on the wise pursuit of happiness. When noting that a wise king shares his wealth to ensure that his people all have enough to make a living, he presented it not as an issue of justice, but as a wise form of generosity that promotes a stable society.

So if you want to promote a program of social change that would be true to Buddhist principles, it would be wise to heed the Buddha's framework for understanding social well-being, beginning with his teachings on merit. In other words, the pursuit of justice, to be in line with the Dhamma, has to be regarded as part of a practice of generosity, virtue, and the development of universal goodwill.

What would this entail? To begin with, it would require focusing primarily on the *means* by which change would be pursued. The choice of a goal, as long as you found it inspiring, would be entirely free, but it would have to be approached through meritorious means.

This would entail placing the same conditions on the pursuit of justice that the Buddha placed on the practice of merit:

1) People should be encouraged to join in the effort only of their own free will. No demands, no attempts to impose social change as a duty, and no attempts to make them feel guilty for not joining your cause. Instead, social change should be presented as a joyous

opportunity for expressing good qualities of the heart. To borrow an expression from the Canon, those qualities are best promoted by embodying them yourself, and by speaking in praise of how those practices will work for the long-term benefit of anyone else who adopts them, too.

2) Efforts for change should not involve harming yourself or harming others. "Not harming yourself," in the context of generosity, means not over-extending yourself, and a similar principle would apply to not harming others: Don't ask them to make sacrifices that would lead to their harm. "Not harming yourself" in the context of virtue would mean not breaking the precepts—e.g., no killing or lying under any circumstances—whereas not harming others would mean not getting *them* to break the precepts (AN 4:99). After all, an underlying principle of kamma is that people are agents who will receive results in line with the type of actions they perform. If you try to persuade them to break the precepts, you're trying to increase their suffering down the line.

3) The goodwill motivating these efforts would have to be universal, with no exceptions. In the Buddha's expression, you would have to protect your goodwill at all times, willing to risk your life for it, the same way a mother would risk her life for her only child (Sn 1:8). This means maintaining goodwill for everyone, regardless of whether they "deserve" it: goodwill for those who you see as guilty as much as for those you see as innocent, and for those who disapprove of your program and stand in your way, no matter how violent or unfair their resistance becomes. For your program to embody universal goodwill, you have to make sure that it works for the long-term benefit even of those who initially oppose it.

THERE ARE TWO MAIN ADVANTAGES to viewing the effort to bring about social justice under the framework of merit. The first is that, by encouraging generosity, virtue, and the development of universal goodwill, you're addressing the internal states of mind that would lead to injustice no matter how well a society might be structured. Generosity helps to overcome the greed that leads people to take unfair advantage of one another. Virtue helps to prevent the lies, thefts, and other callous actions that drive people apart. And universal goodwill helps to overcome the various forms of tribalism that encourage favoritism and other forms of

unfairness.

Second, generosity, virtue, and universal goodwill are, in and of themselves, good activities. Even though you may be inspired by the story of the Buddha's awakening to engage in them, they're so clearly good that they need no story to justify them—and so they wouldn't require the sort of stories that would serve simply to divide us.

Regarding attempts at social change under the principle of kamma would also entail having to accept the principle that any forms of injustice that do *not* respond to the activities of merit have to be treated with equanimity. After all, the results of some past bad actions are so strong that nothing can be done to stop them. And if they could be alleviated now only by unskillful actions—such as lies, killing, theft, or violence—the trade-off in terms of long-term consequences wouldn't be worth it. Any such attempts would not, in the Buddha's analysis, be wise.

In areas like this, we have to return to the Buddha's main focus: the causes of suffering inside. And the good news here is that we don't have to wait for a perfect society to find true happiness. It's possible to put an end to our own sufferings—to stop "saṁsāra-ing"—no matter how bad the world is outside. And this should not be seen as a selfish pursuit. It would actually be more selfish to make people ashamed of their desire to be free so that they will come back to help you and your friends establish your ideas of justice, but with no true end in sight. A final, established state of justice is an impossibility. An unconditioned happiness, available to all regardless of their karmic background, is not.

And the road to that happiness is far from selfish. It requires the activities of merit—generosity, virtue, and universal goodwill—which always spread long-term happiness in the world: a happiness that heals old divisions and creates no new ones in their place. In this way, those who attain this happiness are like the stars that are sucked out of space and time to enter black holes that are actually dense with brightness: As they leave, they unleash waves of dazzling light.

All Winners, No Losers

The Buddha's Teachings on Animosity & Forgiveness

When you forgive someone who's wronged you, it doesn't erase that person's karma in having done wrong. This is why some people think that forgiveness has no place in the karmic universe of the Buddha's teachings, and that it's incompatible with the practice of what he taught. But that's not so. Forgiveness may not be able to undo old bad kamma, but it can prevent new bad karma from being done. This is especially true with the bad kamma that in Pāli is called *vera.* Vera is often translated as "hostility," "animosity," or "antagonism," but it's a particular instance of these attitudes: the vengeful animosity that wants to get back at someone for perceived wrongs. This attitude is what has no place in Buddhist practice. Patience can weaken it, but forgiveness is what clears it out of the way.

The Dhammapada, a popular collection of early Buddhist poems, speaks of vera in two contexts. The first is when someone has injured you, and you'd like to inflict some injury back. The second is when you've lost a contest—in the Buddha's time, this referred primarily to military battles, but now it could be extended to any competition where loss entails harm, whether real or only perceived—and you want to get even.

In both cases, forgiveness is what puts an end to vera. You resolve not to settle the score, even if society grants you the right to do so, because you realize that, from the point of view of karma, the only real score in contests like this consists of more bad karma points for both sides. So, in forgiving the other side, you're basically promising yourself to forego any opportunity to add to the score. You have no idea how many lifetimes this particular karmic mud fight has been going back and forth, but you do know that the only way to end it is to stop the vera, and if the end doesn't first start with you, it may never arrive.

"He
insulted me,
hit me,
beat me,
robbed me"

—for those who brood on this,
vera isn't stilled.

"He insulted me,
hit me,
beat me,
robbed me"—
for those who don't brood on this,
vera is stilled.

Veras aren't stilled
through vera,
regardless.
Veras are stilled
through non-vera:
this, an unending truth. — *Dhp 3–5*

Forgiveness is a stance you may have to make unilaterally, within yourself, but there is the possibility that the other side will be inspired by your example to stop slinging mud as well. That way, both sides will benefit. Yet even if the other side doesn't immediately join in the cease-fire, there will come a time when they lose interest, and that particular back-and-forth will die.

The Buddha recommends three tactics to help you deal with any lingering feelings that this strategy might leave you on the losing side, victimized without recourse.

- The first is to remember that we're all in the process of dying, and you don't want thoughts of vera to get in the way of a skillful death. The narrative that "He wronged me, and I won't feel at peace until I get back at him" is not one you want to focus on as death approaches —something it's doing all the time. Otherwise, you may find yourself reborn with a vera mission, which is a miserable way to live a life. You've got other, better things to do with your time.
- The second tactic is to develop thoughts of infinite goodwill, "free from vera, free from ill will." These thoughts lift your mind to the level of a Brahmā, a very high level of heavenly being, and from that heightened perspective the idea of trying to find satisfaction in

settling old scores seems—as it actually is—petty and mean.

• The third tactic is to take on the five precepts: no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, and no taking intoxicants. Ever. At all. As the Buddha notes, when you hold to these precepts in all your encounters with others, regardless of who they are or what they've done, you give universal safety from danger and vera—at least from your quarter—to all beings. And because that safety is universal, you enjoy a share of that safety yourself.

As for the case when you've lost out in a competition, the Buddha says that you can find peace and end vera only by putting winning and losing aside. To do this, you start by taking a good look at where you try to find happiness. If you look for it in terms of power or material possessions, there will always be winning and losing. If you gain power, for instance, others will have to lose. If others win, you lose. And as the Buddha says,

> Winning gives birth to vera.
> Losing, one lies down in pain. — *Dhp 201*

But if you define happiness in terms of the practice of merit—giving, virtue, and meditation—there's no need to create losers. Everyone wins. When you give, other people naturally gain what you've shared with them; you gain a spacious sense of wealth within and the love and respect of others without. When you're virtuous, abstaining from harming anyone, you gain freedom from remorse over your actions, while others gain safety. When you meditate, you give less rein to your greed, aversion, and delusion, so that you suffer less from their depredations, and other people are less victimized by their prowling around as well.

Then you further reflect:

> Greater in battle
> than the man who would conquer
> a thousand-thousand men,
> is he who would conquer
> just one—
> himself.
>
> Better to conquer yourself
> than others.

When you've trained yourself,
living in constant self-control,
neither a deva nor gandhabba,
nor a Māra banded with Brahmās,
could turn that triumph
back into defeat. — *Dhp 103–105*

Other victories can be undone—"settled" scores, in the light of karma and rebirth, are never really settled—but victory over your own greed, aversion, and delusion is something that lasts. It's the only victory that creates no vera, so it's the only victory that's really safe and secure.

But this isn't a victory you can hope to attain if you're still harboring thoughts of vera. So in a world where we've all been harmed in one way or another, and where we could always find old scores to avenge if we wanted to, the only way to find a truly safe victory in life is to start with thoughts of forgiveness: that you want to pose no danger to anyone at all, regardless of the wrong they've done. This is why forgiveness is not only compatible with the practice of the Buddha's teachings. It's a necessary first step.

How Pointy is One-pointedness?

A Pāli sutta, MN 44, defines concentration as *cittass'ek'aggatā,* which is often translated as "one-pointedness of mind": *cittassa* = "of the mind" or "of the heart," *eka* = one, *agga* = point, *-tā* = -ness. MN 117 defines noble right concentration as any one-pointedness of mind supported by the first seven factors of the noble path, from right view through right mindfulness. MN 43 states further that one-pointedness is a factor of the first jhāna, the beginning level of right concentration.

From these passages, it has been argued that if one's awareness in concentration or jhāna is truly one-pointed, it should be no larger than a point, which means that it would be incapable of thinking, of hearing sounds, or even of being aware of the physical body. However, this interpretation imposes too narrow a meaning on the word *ek'aggatā,* one that is foreign to the linguistic usage of the Pāli Canon.

A. To begin with, *agga* has many other meanings besides "point." In fact, it has two primary clusters of meanings, in neither of which is "point" the central focus.

The first cluster centers on the fact that a summit of a mountain is called its *agga.* Clustered around this meaning are ideas of *agga* as the topmost part of something (such as the ridge of a roof), the tip of something (such as the tip of a blade of grass), and the best or supreme example of something (such as the Buddha as the *agga* of all beings). AN 5:80 plays with these meanings of *agga* when it criticizes monks of the future who will "search for the tiptop flavors *(ras'agga)* with the tip of the tongue (*jivh'agga).*"

The second cluster of meanings for *agga* centers on the idea of "meeting place." A hall where monks gather for the uposatha, for example, is called an *uposath'agga.* The spot where they gather for their meals is called a *bhatt'agga.*

Given that the object of concentration is said to be a dwelling *(vihāra),* and that a person enters and dwells *(viharati)* in the levels of jhāna, this second cluster of meanings may be the more relevant one here. A mind with a single *agga,* in this case, would simply be a mind gathered around one object, and need not be reduced to a single point.

B. An even more telling way to determine the meanings of *ek'agga* and *ek'aggatā* is, instead of dividing these words into their roots, to look at the ways in which the Canon uses them to describe minds.

1. Two passages, one from the Vinaya and one from a sutta, show what *ek'agga* means in the everyday context of listening to the Dhamma.

In Mv.II.3.4, the phrase, "we pay attention," in the instructions for how to listen to the Pāṭimokkha, is defined as: "We listen with an *ek'agga* mind, an unscattered mind, an undistracted mind." Even if *ek'agga* were translated as "one-pointed" here, the "point" is obviously not so restricted as to make the ears fall silent. Otherwise, we would not be able to hear the Pāṭimokkha at all. And the fact that the mind is *ek'agga* doesn't mean that we can't also hear other sounds aside from the Pāṭimokkha. It's just that those sounds don't make the mind lose its focus on a single theme.

In AN 5:151, the Buddha lists five qualities that enable one, when listening to the true Dhamma, to "alight on assuredness, on the rightness of skillful qualities." The five qualities are:

> "One doesn't hold the talk in contempt.
> "One doesn't hold the speaker in contempt.
> "One doesn't hold oneself in contempt.
> "One listens to the Dhamma with an unscattered mind, an ek'agga mind.
> "One attends appropriately."

Because appropriate attention means to contemplate experiences in terms of the four noble truths (see MN 2), this passage shows that when the mind is *ek'agga,* it's not only able to hear. It can also think at the same time. If it couldn't hear or think, it couldn't make sense of the Dhamma talk. So again, even if we translate *ek'agga* as "one-pointed," the one-pointed mind is not so pointy that it cannot think or hear sounds. This would defeat the purpose of listening to the Dhamma and would get in the way of "alighting on assuredness."

2. As for the way in which *ek'agga* is used in describing the mind in concentration, a passage in MN 43 defines the factors of the first jhāna as these: "directed thought, evaluation, rapture, pleasure, and one-pointedness of mind." It has been argued that this statement contains a contradiction, in

that the compilers of MN 43 did not realize that one-pointedness precluded thought and evaluation. But perhaps they knew their own language well enough to realize that *ek'aggatā*—being gathered into oneness—did not preclude the powers of thought.

3. The standard similes for right concentration (DN 2; AN 5:28; MN 119) all emphasize that the mind in right concentration is aware of the entire body. For example, here is the simile for the highest level of jhāna, the fourth:

> "Then, with the abandoning of pleasure & pain—as with the earlier disappearance of joys & distresses—he enters & remains in the fourth jhāna: purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither-pleasure-nor-pain. He sits, permeating the body with a pure, bright awareness. Just as if a man were sitting covered from head to foot with a white cloth so that there would be no part of his body to which the white cloth did not extend; even so, the monk sits, permeating the body with a pure, bright awareness. There is nothing of his entire body unpervaded by pure, bright awareness."

To get around the reference to "entire body" in these similes, those who propose that a one-pointed mind can be aware of only one point interpret "body" in this context as meaning a purely mental body, such as the body of one's thoughts. But that would mean (a) that the similes' emphasis on pervading the entire body would be meaningless if the mental body is reduced to a small point and (b) that the Buddha was extremely sloppy and misleading in his choice of similes to describe concentration. If the purpose of jhāna is blot out awareness of the body, why would he choose a simile for the fourth jhāna in which the entire body is pervaded with awareness?

4. MN 52, MN 111, and AN 9:36 show that the ability to use appropriate attention to analyze any of the four jhānas while still in the state of *ek'aggatā* is an important skill in reaching awakening. In each case, this analysis entails applying appropriate attention: seeing the experience of the jhāna in terms of the four noble truths, and applying the appropriate duty to each truth: comprehending stress, abandoning its cause, realizing its cessation, and developing the path to its cessation. For instance, AN 9:36 describes how, after mastering the first jhāna, one might analyze it in a way that leads to release:

"Suppose that an archer or archer's apprentice were to practice on a straw man or mound of clay, so that after a while he would become able to shoot long distances, to fire accurate shots in rapid succession, and to pierce great masses. In the same way, there is the case where a monk, quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities, enters & remains in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation. He regards whatever phenomena there that are connected with form, feeling, perception, fabrications, & consciousness, as inconstant, stressful, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction, alien, a disintegration, an emptiness, not-self. He turns his mind away from those phenomena, and having done so, inclines his mind to the property of deathlessness: 'This is peace, this is exquisite—the resolution of all fabrications; the relinquishment of all acquisitions; the ending of craving; dispassion; cessation; unbinding.'

"Staying right there, he reaches the ending of the effluents. Or, if not, then—through this very Dhamma-passion, this Dhamma-delight, and from the total ending of the five lower fetters [self-identification views, grasping at habits & practices, uncertainty, sensual passion, and irritation]—he is due to arise spontaneously (in the Pure Abodes), there to be totally unbound, never again to return from that world."

As MN 111 makes especially clear, this sort of analysis can be accomplished while one is still in the state of jhāna. To view the phenomena experienced in the first jhāna in terms of form, feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness is to regard them as instances of the five clinging-aggregates, which is the definition of the first noble truth. To regard them as inconstant, etc., is to apply the duty appropriate to the first noble truth, which is to comprehend that truth to the point of dispassion (SN 22:23).

In this way, the Buddha's recommendations for alighting on the Dhamma while in jhāna parallel those for alighting on the Dhamma while listening to a Dhamma talk: Don't hold the Buddha in contempt, i.e., give his teachings a fair hearing and a fair test. Show your lack of contempt for your meditation object by giving it your full attention and mastering concentration. Show your lack of contempt for yourself by convincing yourself that you can do this. Gather the mind around its one object. And

analyze the component factors of the mind's one-pointedness with appropriate attention.

This ability to analyze a state of concentration in this way while the mind is still gathered around its single object is a crucial skill in attaining release. For this reason, the term that defines concentration—*cittass'ek'aggatā*—shouldn't be defined in so narrow a sense that it would obstruct any efforts to master that skill and gain its benefits.

The Limits of Description

Not-self Revisited

The Buddha once divided his teachings into two categories: those whose meaning has been fully drawn out, and those whose meaning should be inferred (AN 2:24). When dealing with a teaching in the first category, he said, trying to draw further implications from it would actually be an act of slandering him. When dealing with a teaching in the second category, *not* drawing out its further implications would be an act of slandering him. Unfortunately, the Buddha didn't give examples of which teachings belonged to which category. Still, the simple fact that he distinguished between these two categories makes an important statement about his teachings as a whole: He wasn't trying to set out a systematically consistent description of reality. If he had been, the existence of the first category—teachings that shouldn't have inferences drawn from them—would have been an admission of failure: To try to prevent his listeners from exploring the implications of some of his statements would be an attempt to keep those listeners from seeing that they were inconsistent with the rest of the system.

But as the Buddha said on several occasions, the essence of all his teachings was to lead to release (MN 29–30). In other words, his words were never meant to be just descriptive. They were primarily performative: meant to be put to use to have an effect on the mind. In some cases, the proper effect was to be achieved by taking his words just as they were. In others, it was best achieved by exploring the implications of the words. But in no case were the words ends in themselves.

This point relates to the Buddha's observations about the uses and limitations of language. One of the standard Canonical descriptions of how to ask about the meaning of an expression is "to what extent is this so?" In other words, "how far is this meant to be true?" This could be taken simply as an idiomatic expression with no deeper meaning, except that the realizations leading to release include "having directly known the extent of designation and the extent of the objects of designation, the extent of expression and the extent of the objects of expression, the extent of description and the extent of the objects of description, the extent of

discernment and the extent of the objects of discernment" (DN 15). To see the extent of these things means to see both the limitations of language, descriptions, and definitions, *and* what lies beyond them: the unfabricated dimension of unbinding *(nibbāna).*

Even a stream-enterer—one who has had his/her first taste of awakening—is said to have seen the drawbacks of the faculty of discernment, which is equivalent to right view, and also the escape from it (SN 48:3). On the way to awakening, a person who applies the highest level of right view to the arising and passing away of contact at the senses is said to enter a mental state where even thoughts of "existence" and "non-existence" with reference to the world of the six senses don't occur to the mind (SN 12:15). Having been through such an experience—and the resulting release—it's hard to imagine that such a person would then give total, unlimited approval to statements about the existence or non-existence of anything in the world. Truths, even when true, have their limits. This is why the texts so often speak derisively of sectarians who defend a view saying, "Only this is true; anything otherwise is worthless" (AN 10:93).

The need ultimately to go beyond words and discernment comes from the fact that they are made of perceptions and thought-fabrications, which are aggregates coming under the term "name" in "name-and-form." As with all aggregates, even the statements of right view, after they have done their work, have to be abandoned for the mind to gain release. But more than that: A perception may be true as far as it goes, but there are limitations to how far it can go, and as DN 15 indicates, there's a need to see those limitations. In one passage, the Buddha goes to the extent of identifying only one thing as really true: unbinding.

> "See the world, together with its devas,
> supposing not-self to be self.
> Entrenched in name-and-form,
> they suppose that 'This is true.'
> In whatever terms they suppose it,
> it turns into something other than that,
> and that's what's false about it:
> Changing,
> it's deceptive by nature.
> Undeceptive by nature

is unbinding:
That the noble ones know
        as true.
They, through breaking through
        to the truth,
hunger-free,
are totally unbound." — *Sn 3:12*

This, however, doesn't mean that the Buddha meant for his words only to be performative without trying to make them accurate as descriptions. He never dealt in "useful fictions." As he said in MN 58, his words were always true, beneficial, and timely. In his analysis of what that meant, he gave no room to the possibility that any statement could be either beneficial or timely if it were false. But having seen what lies beyond language, and making the dimension beyond language the goal of his teaching, he must have been very sensitive to the limits of how far a statement could be true. This is why, as a teacher, his main concern was to use true statements in such a way that they would lead the listener to act in such a way as to lead to release. And this is why he would avoid answering questions on topics where statements of any kind would not lead in that direction. It's possible to find at least 60 questions in the suttas that the Buddha or his arahant disciples put aside on the grounds that any attempt to answer them would actually get in the way of awakening (see *Skill in Questions,* chapter eight).

So when interpreting the Buddha's teachings, it's important not to fall into the scholarly bias that tries to capture the views of an awakened person in the net of its language. This applies both to attempts to draw implications from his words to answer questions that he put aside—which, as AN 2:24 notes, would be akin to slandering him—and to attempts to depict the practice as a process of leading the meditator simply to give full assent to the accuracy of the Buddha's teachings as a description of reality. To capture the practice in a net of words in these ways is to miss the meaning and purpose of the Buddha's teachings entirely.

* * *

These reflections were sparked recently by reading a critique of an article I wrote in 1993, called "The Not-self Strategy." The thesis of that article—which I revised in 2013 both to tighten and to expand the

presentation—was that the Buddha intended his teaching on not-self *(anattā),* not as an answer to the metaphysical/ontological question, "Is there a self?" but as a strategy for cutting through clinging to the five aggregates and so to put an end to suffering. The main argument I presented in support of this thesis in both versions of the article was that the one time the Buddha was asked point-blank, "Is there a self?"… "Is there no self?" he remained silent (SN 44:10). Similarly, in MN 2, he stated that such questions as "Do I exist?" "Do I not exist?" and "What am I?" are not worthy of attention because they lead to conclusions that fetter a person in a "thicket of views" and a "fetter of views," including the views that "I have a self" and "I have no self." In other words, any attempt to answer these questions constituted a side road away from the path of right practice.

The critique—"Anattā as Strategy and Ontology," written by Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi—was brought to my attention just over a month ago, even though it has apparently been around for some time. It takes issue both with the thesis and with the argument of my article, but in doing so it displays the scholarly bias mentioned above: that the practice of the Buddha's teachings is primarily a process of leading the meditator to give full assent to the accuracy of those teachings as a description of reality, and that this assent is what frees the mind from suffering. Because this bias is not only the bias of the critique, but of so much thought in the Buddhist world, I thought it might be useful to explore how both the thesis of the critique and the arguments used in support of that thesis display this bias, so that it can be recognized for what it is not only in this case but also in other Buddhist writings.

For ease of reference, I will state the critique's main points in a numbered format. In the response to those points, I will avoid—except where necessary—repeating arguments already made in "The Not-self Strategy." If you are interested in the full argument presented in that article, I recommend that you read the 2013 version, available in the essay collection, *Noble & True.*

The basic thesis of the critique is actually an ancient one, with a long history in the Buddhist philosophical tradition. It can be summarized in the form of a syllogism:

1. For the Buddha, the term "self" has to mean a substantial,

permanent, unchanging essence.

2. Personal identity—what you really are—is composed of conditioned elements that are constantly changing.

Therefore: 3. There is no self.

The critique admits that the Buddha never assented to the statement "There is no self," but maintains that he had two pragmatic reasons for not directly stating this truth that is implicit in his teachings.

4. The first is that, because the view of an underlying substantial self is so deeply ingrained in the unawakened mind, the simple, direct statement that there is no self would not uproot it. Instead, the meditator would come to that conclusion only through the indirect means of examining each element of his/her personal identity to see that none of those elements were permanent in themselves or had an essential relationship to anything permanent.

5. The second reason is that the annihilationists—sectarians who argued that death was the end of consciousness and personal identity—also taught that there is no self, so to simply state this truth might mislead people into thinking that the Buddha was siding with the annihilationists.

Despite the potential drawback cited in point five, the critique argues that, with proper explanation, it can be avoided, and that there is still practical value in stating the abstract principle lying implicitly behind the Buddha's indirect approach for three reasons:

6. The fact that there is no self is what makes the teaching on not-self work as a strategy.

7. The attainment of stream-entry is what frees the meditator from the mistaken belief that there is an unchanging core to personal identity.

8. Therefore, to help a person aiming at stream-entry, it is important to state that the not-self teaching is not only a strategy but also a statement of an ontological truth: There is no self.

9. Finally, the author asserts that the not-self teaching cannot be said to have only a strategic purpose because the right view that there is no permanent self is not just a factor of the path for those in training, but is also an inalienable endowment for the arahant.

The critique cites several passages from the Pāli Canon to support these points. However, when we examine these points both on their own merits and in relationship to the passages meant to support them, we find that the scholarly bias behind them turns the Buddha's teachings into the thicket of views that the Buddha expressly warned against entering.

By Definition

1. The first point in the critique's thesis makes its case through a definition: One's identity has to be permanent to count as a "self." The Buddha, however, never defined "self" in this way. Before looking at the critique's textual argument for inferring this definition from a passage in the Canon, it's worth looking at the historical and practical reasons for calling the inference into question.

a. *Historical.* There is a popular belief, promoted by many scholars, that the Buddha formulated his not-self teaching primarily in response to the Upaniṣadic doctrine of a permanent, unchanging self, identical with the ground of being for the cosmos. Thus it is only natural that "self," in the time of the Buddha, meant a permanent unchanging essence lying at the core of one's identity.

However, this belief misses two important facts.

The first is that the Pāli Canon cites a wide variety of beliefs about the self current in the Buddha's time, and many of them proposed a self that was finite—i.e., it comes to an end—and subject to change. DN 15 provides a framework for classifying the different possible views about self, starting with four types of self: possessed of form and finite, possessed of form and infinite, formless and finite, and formless and infinite. Further, beliefs about each of these four types state that the self is either already that way, or that it naturally becomes that way (for instance, at death or when falling asleep), or that it can be made to become that way (through practice of one sort or another). Combining these two lists gives altogether 12 types of self-doctrines, only two of which teach an unchanging self: the self already possessed of form and infinite, and the self already formless and infinite. In addition, DN 1 cites seven annihilationist views about the self—three defining the self as possessed of form, four defining it as formless—that perished at death.

Moreover, there are two instances where the Buddha, when mentioning

the view of a permanent, unchanging self, identical with the cosmos (MN 2; SN 22:81), mentions it alongside other views of the self, implying that it is simply a particular instance of self-view, and not the only one he is trying to refute. In MN 2, he mentions it as a special case of the view, "I have a self." In SN 22:81, he mentions it as an additional case after discussing twenty ways in which a self-view can be constructed around the five aggregates.

So it's clear that the permanent, unchanging self mentioned in some of the Upaniṣads (such as Bṛhad-āraṇyaka I.4.7–10 and Chāndogya III.14.2–3) was not the only self-view the Buddha was addressing with his not-self teaching.

The second fact missed by the popular belief about the primacy of the Upaniṣadic view of the self at the Buddha's time is that the major Upaniṣads are not unanimous in the ways they define the self. It's impossible to know whether all of these Upaniṣads existed at the time of the Buddha, but it's enlightening to note that the major ones offer a variety of doctrines of the self that fall into at least eight, and perhaps nine, of the categories listed in DN 15, including doctrines that describe the self as already possessed of form and finite (Bṛhad-āraṇyaka II.5.1; Maitrī VI.11) and naturally becoming possessed of form and finite (Bṛhad-āraṇyaka IV.3.19–21). In other words, even some of the Upaniṣads taught the self was impermanent. So it might have been the case that the Buddha derived many of the categories of his framework in DN 15 at least partly from the wide variety of self-views in the Upaniṣads.

So the idea of a permanent self did not have a monopoly in the time of the Buddha. This means that if he were going to insist arbitrarily, as a crucial assumption, that a self had to be permanent to qualify as a self, he would have had to present a case to defend that definition. But he never did. So it's unlikely that this assumption should be inferred from his teachings.

b. *Practical.* One of the fetters abandoned at stream-entry is the fetter of identity views. The Canon shows that these views relate to various ways of conceiving the self in relation to the five aggregates. However, to restrict the definition of "self" in this case to a permanent, unchanging essence raises many practical questions: Why would a belief in a permanent self be any more of a fetter than a belief in an impermanent self? And if the annihilationists, as DN 1 shows, believe in an impermanent self, does that mean that they have already dropped the fetter of identity views? If so, why

does the Buddha single them out as holding to a view that is particularly evil *(pāpaka)?* Practical experience shows that people who define their body as their self, knowing that it will perish at death, are even more attached to it, and will do worse things to ensure its survival, than do people who believe that the self survives death. And the recent embrace of gender fluidity has shown that people will cling just as firmly to the fluidity of an identity they know to be fluid as they will to an identity that they think is permanent.

So to insist that a self-view has to posit a permanent self in order to be a fetter makes no practical sense.

c. *Textual*. The passage the critique uses to infer that the Buddha assumed implicitly that the term "self" had to mean a permanent, unchanging essence comes from MN 148. In this passage, the Buddha argues that it's not tenable to view the senses, their objects—along with consciousness, contact, feeling, and craving based on the senses and their objects—as self. The reasoning in each case follows the same pattern, and can be illustrated with the Buddha's argument focused on the first sense, the eye:

> "If anyone were to say, 'The eye is the self,' that wouldn't be tenable. The arising and falling away of the eye are discerned. And when its arising and falling away are discerned, it would follow that 'My self arises and falls away.' That's why it wouldn't be tenable if anyone were to say, 'The eye is the self.' So the eye is not-self."

Although it might be possible to infer from this passage that the Buddha assumes that self must be defined as something permanent—not subject to arising and falling away—the above-mentioned difficulties that would follow from this inference suggest that there must be a better way to construe the Buddha's reasoning here. And there is, one inherent in *any* idea of self: The self, whether permanent or not, can't watch itself arise and pass away. To discern its arising, it would have to be there before its arising; to discern its passing way, it would have to survive its passing away. This means that whatever it's discerning as arising and passing away can't be the same thing that it is. Which means that that "whatever" isn't its self.

This interpretation avoids the above difficulties of insisting that "self" has to mean a permanent, unchanging essence because it focuses on a fact inherent in every idea of self, and is not an arbitrary assumption with little practical value. It also allows for the fact that clinging to the idea of an impermanent self can be a fetter. So it's a preferable way of interpreting this

passage.

At the same time, this interpretation is in line with the meaning of the term, *anicca,* which the Buddha frequently used in connection with the teaching on not-self, and which is all too often translated as "impermanent." Actually, the term is the negative form of *nicca,* or "constant." To say that the aggregates are *anicca* is not to say that they don't last forever, but that they're inconstant: unreliable and fluctuating. Their arising and passing away is discernible in the present moment. This observable fact is what can lead to the value judgment that they are not worthy of regarding as self.

So there's no basis in the Canon for supporting the first point of the critique, that the word "self" in the Buddha's teachings has to mean a permanent unchanging essence.

A Distinction without a Difference

2. Given that "self" in the Buddha's teachings doesn't have to mean a permanent essence, it's a mistake to distinguish—as the critique's second premise does—between "self" and "constituents of personal identity"—i.e., what you *are.* "What you are" is the same thing as your self, regardless of whether that identity is permanent or not.

The fact that, for the Buddha, this would count as a distinction without a difference is shown by the questionnaire he frequently used to lead his listeners to the conclusion that the aggregates are not-self. With each aggregate, he would ask, "Is it constant or inconstant?" The answer: "Inconstant." The questionnaire would then proceed as follows:

> "And is that which is inconstant easeful or stressful?"
>
> "Stressful, lord."
>
> "And is it fitting to regard what is inconstant, stressful, subject to change as: 'This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am'? [or: 'I am this'?]"
>
> "No, lord."

He would then conclude, taking form as an example:

> "Every form is to be seen with right discernment as it has come to be: 'This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.' [or: 'I am not this.']" — *SN 22:59*

Notice that the Buddha here treats these two sentences—'This is my self' and 'This is what I am' [or: 'I am this']—as equivalent. In other words, the five aggregates are not your self, nor are they what you are. The critique, however, wants to make a distinction here, saying that the five aggregates *are* what you are, even though they don't qualify as a self, forcing a distinction where the Buddha doesn't see one. From his point of view, to say that the five aggregates comprise your identity—i.e., what-you-are—even though you realize that they are impermanent, is the same thing as saying that they're your self. This, of course, would go directly against the point he is trying to make with this questionnaire, that the aggregates are not worth identifying with in any way at all.

The fact that the Canon treats "this is my self" as equivalent to "I am this" or "I am that" is also shown by the way it defines the fetter of identity view, one of the three fetters abandoned on the first level of awakening. MN 44 defines identity view as any one of 20 ways of assuming a self around the aggregates. SN 22:89 equates the assumption of a self around any of the aggregates with the assumption of "I am this" with regard those aggregates. (This is why the annihilationists who say that the self perishes at death (DN 1) are still fettered with identity view.) So, as far as the Canon is concerned, the critique's distinction between "self" and "what you are" indicates no difference at all.

We find that this false distinction runs into even more serious problems when we consider what it would mean for the post-mortem fate of the arahant. Because the aggregates end with the attaining of total unbinding at the death of the arahant, to say that the changing aggregates that constitute your personal identity through many lifetimes *would* end at death if you have attained unbinding would be a self-view falling under one of the twelve categories set out in DN 15: the self possessed of form that is not already finite, and does not naturally become that way on its own, but can be *made* to become that way through practice. Although this view is not identical with the annihilationist view that every self perishes at death, it does constitute a type of annihilationism when it comes to the death of an arahant: An arahant, whose identity consisted of the five aggregates prior to death, would no longer exist after death.

The Buddha, however, was always extremely careful to avoid the position that an arahant does not exist after death. In fact, SN 22:85 goes so far as to label it an "evil *(pāpaka)* viewpoint." When presented with the

fourfold question as to whether an awakened one—called a Tathāgata, meaning a Buddha or an arahant disciple—existed, didn't exist, both existed and didn't exist, or neither existed nor didn't exist after death—he refused to agree to any of the alternatives. If he held the unspoken assumption that there really is no self, then he wouldn't have had to take such pains to avoid taking a stand on the issue: The arahant, being composed of the five aggregates, simply would not exist after death. But because the Buddha was so careful not to take that position, and to even regard it as evil, shows that he did not view the five aggregates as constituting one's identity, and did not hold to the unspoken assumption that there is no self.

So these are some of the textual inconsistencies that come from identifying the aggregates as the constituents of personal identity. They can all be avoided, however, by following the Buddha's example:

> a) by regarding the aggregates not as the constituents of your personal identity, but as the *raw material* from which, through the activities of *ahaṅkāra* and *mamaṅkāra,* "I-making" and "my-making," you construct your identity; and
>
> b) by at the same time paying no attention to the question of whether or not there is a self lying behind that activity.

In following the Buddha's strategy here, we avoid not only the textual inconsistencies cited above, but also some very practical problems that would come from assuming either the existence or the non-existence of a self lying behind the activity of I-making and my-making. As the Buddha notes in SN 44:10, to assume that there is a self lying behind that activity would get in the way of applying the perception of not-self to all phenomena. You'd be continually looking for that self, and would protect it when you thought you had found it. That way, there would still be an area of experience subject to clinging—and subtle suffering—that would never get abandoned.

On the other hand, if you assumed that there was *no* self lying behind your I-making and my-making, you'd fall into either of the two extremes listed in Iti 49: Either you would fear that, with the ending of I-making and my-making, there would no longer be any you, and so you'd be afraid to put an end to your creation of a sense of self; or else, eager for the destruction of your I-made self, you'd fall into the extreme of craving for non-becoming. As the Buddha noted in MN 49 and SN 56:11, craving for non-becoming

paradoxically leads to more becoming and its attendant suffering. So in either case, your assumptions about the existence or non-existence of a self would get in the way of release.

Iti 49 describes briefly the way out of this dilemma: seeing what has come to be as come to be—in other words, seeing what is actually occurring simply as actually occurring—and developing dispassion for it. SN 12:15, noted above, helps to explain how this works: By focusing on the origination and passing away of events at the six senses, the mind enters a state where thoughts of "existence" and "non-existence" don't occur to it. In that state, questions of the existence or non-existence of the self also don't arise, as you're focused purely on the suffering inherent in whatever phenomena are originated and pass away. This makes it easier to let go of the desire fueling those phenomena with no concern for what this contemplation would do to the existence of a "self," and in that way the mind can gain release.

As for the question of the status of the arahant after death, the Buddha notes in SN 23:2 that a "being" is defined by attachment to the aggregates. Where there is no attachment, no being can be located. And when no being can be located to define what it is, nothing can properly be said about it. This is why SN 22:85–86 make the point that, when you can't even define a fully awakened person in the present life, how can you predicate anything about awakened people after they die?

Further Implications

3. Because the two premises of the syllogism lying at the heart of the criticism of "The Not-self Strategy" are false, the conclusion based on them is unfounded. In other words, it's a mistake to attribute to the Buddha an unspoken assumption that there is no self. This means that the remaining points dependent on the syllogism also don't follow. However, some important practical and interpretive lessons can be drawn from considering exactly where some of those points go astray. Here I will focus only on the points that are useful to consider in this way: 5, 6, and 9.

5. Point five claims that the Buddha avoided saying that there is no self because it would have confused some of his listeners into thinking that he was siding with the annihilationist view that death is automatically

annihilation.

On an immediate level, it's hard not to be amazed at modern interpreters who think that, although the Buddha refused to state that there is no self for fear that this statement would cause confusion among his listeners, they can make this statement at present on his behalf without causing confusion among theirs.

However, that point aside, the critique bolsters its claim here with an assertion that has to be addressed. The assertion is this: When, in SN 44:10 and MN 2, the Buddha refuses to accept the statement that there is no self, his refusal can be explained because "there is no self" is an annihilationist thesis and he can't consent to the consequences that the annihilationists draw from that thesis, that there is no conscious survival beyond the present life.

This interpretation is mistaken on two points.

• Although SN 44:10 does state that to say there is no self would be to conform with the annihilationists, MN 2 makes no mention of annihilationists or annihilationism at all. So there is no reason to assert that in that sutta he is rejecting the statement "I have no self" only because he wanted to avoid sounding like an annihilationist. As he says there, simply the view, "I have no self" gets one involved in a thicket of views. And the tangled history of Buddhist philosophy—ever since interpreters of the Dhamma began interpreting the not-self teaching as based on the assumption that there is no self—has borne this statement out.

• The Buddha had a systematic strategy for classifying questions into four types, as to whether they deserved a categorical answer, an analytical answer, whether they might first require cross-questioning the listener before answering, or whether they should be put aside and left unanswered. In both SN 44:10 and MN 2, he leaves the question of the existence of a self unanswered. If he had an analytical view of the non-existence of the self—that, for example, there is no permanent self, but that there is a continuum of personal identity that does not automatically end with death—he could have easily stated it. But he didn't. He had it totally within his power to have said, "There is no categorical answer to that question," his typical way of beginning a response to a question deserving an analytical answer. But he didn't. If, in SN 44:10 he had wanted to state such an analytical position to Ven. Ānanda, who was present at the conversation and who surely would

have understood him, he would have. But he didn't. And, as noted above, in MN 2 he states in no uncertain terms that questions related to the existence or non-existence of the self aren't worth paying attention to at all.

As noted in the introduction to this essay, to draw inferences from the Buddha's teachings that would provide answers to questions he deliberately put aside—even if they are analytical answers—has to count as a form of slander as mentioned in AN 2:24.

Why Does the Not-self Strategy Work?

6. Point six raises a valuable question: Why does the not-self strategy work in liberating the mind from clinging? Rather than following the critique's strategy of trying to find the answer to this question by inferring from the suttas a position that the Buddha refused to endorse—that there is no self—it's more fruitful to look for the answer in the Buddha's express statements about how and why clinging to a self-view happens in the first place. When we understand how self-view is fabricated, how clinging is fabricated around that, and why that clinging constitutes suffering, we can understand the Buddha's strategy for bringing these fabrications to an end.

MN 44 notes that all self-identity views revolve around one or more of the five aggregates: form, feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness. In each case, the self can be defined as being identical with the aggregate, as possessing the aggregate, as being inside the aggregate, or as containing the aggregate within it. This gives twenty types of identity-view in all.

Acts of fabrication, i.e., intentional choices, play a many-layered role in shaping the aggregates and any of the identity views that cluster around them. As SN 22:79 notes, fabrication plays a role in fabricating each aggregate for a purpose. And as SN 22:81 further notes, the act of assuming a self around any of the aggregates is also a fabrication, based on craving, which in turn is based on ignorance. SN 22:60 identifies the purpose underlying both layers of fabrication: It's because of the pleasure to be obtained from the aggregates that beings are infatuated with them. We fabricate both the aggregates and the sense of self around them in order to obtain that pleasure. In other words, the *pleasure* to be found in the aggregates is the root cause of why we desire them and cling to them, building a sense of self around them. Even without having to think that the

aggregates are permanent, if we think that the pleasures that can be derived from them are worth the effort that goes into clinging to them, we'll choose to cling.

All of this is in line with two observations from AN 10:58: That all phenomena are rooted in desire, and are brought into being through attention. In this case, the desire is for pleasure, and the act of attention is that of attending inappropriately to questions about the past, present, and future existence of the self (MN 2) in hopes that the answer will help realize our desire and maximize the pleasure.

The problem is that clinging to a self-view counts as a form of suffering as defined in the first noble truth (SN 56:11). So in our ignorant pursuit of pleasure, we end up constructing suffering instead. In most cases, this clinging entails suffering because it tries to latch on to things that will change (SN 22:1). But it's also possible for the mind, on its first encounters with the deathless, to cling to that experience (MN 52; AN 9:36). Even though the deathless is not fabricated, and so is not subject to change, the act of clinging to it *is* fabricated, and so entails suffering nevertheless.

Because all of this clinging and fabrication is driven by desire, sparked by an ignorant value judgment—seeing that it's worth the effort to fabricate aggregates and self-views for the sake of the pleasure—the strategy to undercut it has to replace it with a more accurate value judgment: That the pleasure is not really worth the effort at all.

This is where the not-self strategy comes in: to focus attention on how much effort actually goes into fabricating the aggregates and the self-views based around them, and on how the results don't really repay the effort that goes into them. In other words, its purpose is to accentuate the *fact* of the effort required by fabrication and to raise the question of its *value:* whether it's worth the effort to keep fabricating.

SN 22:57 outlines the general approach of this strategy in seven interrelated steps. The first four steps follow the pattern of the four noble truths: directly knowing each aggregate, directly knowing the origination of the aggregate, i.e., what gives rise to it; directly knowing the cessation of that aggregate; and directly knowing the path of practice leading to the cessation of that aggregate, i.e., the noble eightfold path.

The first two of these steps—in which the aggregates are observed as they actually occur *(yathābhūtaṁ)*—is meant to draw attention to how the

aggregates do not simply happen and maintain themselves on their own. A lot of desire and effort go into shaping them and trying to keep them going. This is why, in the first step, the term "origination" *(samudaya)* is important. It doesn't denote just the act of arising; it denotes the process of causation: what *makes* the aggregate arise. To see this requires more than bare awareness of events. You learn about causation not by simply watching things come and go, but by trying to make them come and make them go. That's when you learn what's a causal factor and what's not. SN 22:5, taken together with AN 9:36, states that the ideal way to learn about the origination of the aggregates is to turn them into a state of concentration. And SN 45:8 notes that desire is an essential part of the right effort leading to right concentration. Thus, the act of focusing your desire on giving rise to right concentration—which is part of the noble eightfold path, the fourth step—is the test case in which the aggregates are fabricated in a way that allows you to see clearly how they originate in step one.

The fifth and sixth steps expand on the role of right view and appropriate attention in the fourth step: directly knowing the allure of the aggregate, i.e., the pleasure that can be found in the aggregate; and directly knowing the drawbacks of the aggregate, i.e., the pain and suffering involved in clinging to the aggregate.

This sixth step is where the Buddha's not-self strategy is applied. The perception of not-self is actually one of several perceptions that he says can be applied to the aggregates to drive home the point that the drawbacks of fabricating the aggregates far outweigh the allure of continuing to fabricate them. AN 9:36 lists eleven perceptions that can perform this function: perceiving the aggregates as inconstant, stressful, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction, alien, a disintegration, an emptiness, not-self. These fall under three main perceptions: inconstancy, stress/suffering, and not-self. And as we have seen from the Buddha's not-self questionnaire, these three are intimately related. If something is inconstant, it's stressful. If it's stressful, it's not worth identifying as "mine," "my self," or "what I am." As noted above, SN 12:15 says that this contemplation, when applied to events at the senses as they are happening, leads to a state where there are no thoughts of "existence" or "non-existence," so there's no concern for what this contemplation will do to the existence or non-existence of the self. In this way, the Buddha's questionnaire, and the resulting value judgment, can be applied without fear to every aggregate as it's experienced.

When this value judgment hits home as it catches the mind in the act of fabricating even the most desirable fabrication possible—right concentration—it leads to the seventh step, the escape from the aggregates, which is dispassion. This seventh step is actually identical with the third: the cessation of the aggregates. Because fabrication is driven by passion and desire, dispassion puts an end to the drive, and fabrication ceases. When fabrication ceases, the aggregates and everything constructed around them cease as well, and the mind, relinquishing everything, attains the unfabricated: release.

The nature of the value judgment leading to this release is reflected in the words the Buddha uses to describe clinging on the one hand, and disenchantment—the step just prior to dispassion (SN 56:11)—on the other. *Upādāna,* the word for clinging, also denotes sustenance and the act of taking sustenance. In other words, to feed is to cling is to suffer: This is the import of the Buddha's first noble truth. *Nibbidā,* disenchantment, is a word used to describe the sense of having had enough of a particular food, and not wanting to eat it any more. So: To cling to something as self is a way of feeding on it; perceptions of not-self—along with the other perceptions focusing on the drawbacks of the mind's sustenance and taking sustenance—are meant to turn an avid eater into one with no more appetite. The good news of the Buddha's teachings is that in losing your desire to feed in this way, you don't starve. Instead, you're brought to a dimension where there's no need to feed. As Sn 3:12 and many other texts affirm, the freedom of unbinding is hunger-free.

The dynamic underlying this change of heart depends on more than simply agreeing to arbitrary definitions of terms. It has to come from a value judgment, as you catch the mind in the process of shaping the food on which it wants to feed, and see that the anticipated rewards are simply not worth it. Only a judgment of this sort, focused on the mind's activities as they are in the course of actually happening *(yathābhūtaṁ)* can break the mind of its ignorant, unskillful habits.

Because the mind's habits are the main factor shaping its experience—this is the point of the famous first line of the Dhammapada, that the mind precedes all phenomena—getting it to change its habits will change its experience. To get it to stop fabricating entirely will allow it to experience the unfabricated. And it's precisely in the power of the Buddha's teachings to steer the mind, the chief instigator, in this direction that their

performative function lies.

The exact nature of the difference between the approach outlined here and the one offered in the critique can be highlighted by exploring a seemingly small issue of translation. As part of his critique, Ven. Bodhi cites a passage from SN 22:126 to the effect that ignorance can be ended by observing that the aggregates are subject to arising and ceasing. However, the term he translates as "arising" is the same term used above in SN 22:57: *samudaya,* or origination. To translate it as "arising" gives the impression that ignorance can be ended by witnessing, through bare awareness, the arising and ceasing of the aggregates and concurring with the general principle that, yes, they do arise and cease.

But this misses an important dynamic in the practice, which lies in seeing the extent to which your own desires and efforts play a complicit causal role in that arising and that, in fostering a passion for fabricating, you've been fooling yourself all along. It's only when you stop fabricating—on realizing that the allure of the aggregates is not worth the effort of fabricating—that the unfabricated can appear. The perception of not-self is one of the Buddha's strategic, performative teachings for inducing the value judgment that can bring this necessary change of heart about.

It's useful to note here that because the perception of not-self is a value judgment, it allows for different judgments at different stages of the path. This is important, for on the beginning stages of the path, a skillful perception of self is actually worth cultivating. If used appropriately, it can get you to start on the path and to stick with it (AN 4:159; AN 3:40). You start on the path because you see that you'll benefit from it and that you have within you the ability to follow it; you stick with it out of a continuing concern for your own well-being. On these stages, the perception of "not-self" is applied to things that would pull you away from the practice of virtue, concentration, or discernment. Only when these practices have been mastered (AN 9:36) can the perception of not-self be applied to all phenomena, for at that point the strategy of thinking in terms of a self is no longer needed. The ultimate happiness (MN 13) has been attained.

That's what we can gather from the Canon's express statements as to how and why the not-self strategy works.

The Right View of One Beyond Training

9. In addition to the arguments based on the syllogism given in points 1–3, the critique of "The Not-self Strategy" bolsters its position by making three observations to the effect that arahants are endowed with right view. This, the argument goes, means that right view does not merely serve a strategic function on the path. It states a truth about the non-existence of the self that arahants continue to see as true.

• The first point is that MN 65 and MN 78 state that an arahant is endowed with the "right view of one beyond training." The critique claims that because this term is nowhere defined, its meaning must be identical with the right view of one on the path: that all phenomena are not-self.

• The second point is that in SN 22:122 Ven. Sāriputta states that arahants should attend to the five aggregates as not-self:

> "An arahant should attend in an appropriate way to these five clinging-aggregates as inconstant, stressful, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction, alien, a dissolution, an emptiness, not-self. Although, for an arahant, there is nothing further to do, and nothing to add to what has been done, still these things—when developed and pursued—lead both to a pleasant abiding in the here and now, and to mindfulness and alertness."

This, the critique concludes, means that the perception of not-self serves purposes beyond the path, and that even though an arahant no longer has to develop right view, the right view with which he/she is inalienably endowed is that all phenomena are not-self.

• The third point is in response to the fact that "The Not-self Strategy" quoted passages from the Canon stating that arahants are beyond views, and are not attached to ideas of "true" and "false." In response, the critique notes that those passages come from poems in the Canon: passages from the Sutta Nipāta and the concluding poem of AN 4:24. Being poems, it says, these passages are only suggestive rather than lucid, and so are not as reliable a guide to the Dhamma as the prose passages. Because the above prose passages show that arahants in no way discard right view even though they don't cling to it, those passages should be taken as more authoritative.

To respond to these three observations:

• First, there are many stages of right view even prior to awakening. As noted three times above, every arahant has gone through an advanced stage

of right view where notions of "existence" and "non-existence" don't occur to the mind:

> "By and large, Kaccāna, this world is supported by [takes as its object] a polarity, that of existence and non-existence. But when one sees the origination of the world [i.e., the six sense media] as it has come to be with right discernment, 'non-existence' with reference to the world does not occur to one. When one sees the cessation of the world as it has come to be with right discernment, 'existence' with reference to the world does not occur to one.
>
> "By and large, Kaccāna, this world is in bondage to attachments, clingings [sustenances], and biases. But one such as this does not get involved with or cling to these attachments, clingings, fixations of awareness, biases, or obsessions; nor is he resolved on 'my self.' He has no uncertainty or doubt that mere stress, when arising, is arising; stress, when passing away, is passing away. In this, his knowledge is independent of others. It's to this extent, Kaccāna, that there is right view." — *SN 12:15*

SN 22:94 shows that the Buddha, after awakening, would use concepts of existence and non-existence to talk about the world. But you have to wonder: After having developed the right view described above, and seen the release that comes from it, to what extent would he hold to concepts of "existence" and "non-existence" within his own mind? There's no way of knowing apart from attaining full awakening yourself. Even Anāthapiṇḍika, a stream-enterer, when asked about the Buddha's views, replied, "I don't know all of the Blessed One's view" (AN 10:93). And although, for an awakened one, statements of right view may be true as far as they go, only one who, like an arahant, has known the limits of description and what lies beyond those limits of description (DN 15) would be in a position to know how far that "true" actually goes.

As SN 47:4 states, arahants still develop the establishings of mindfulness after their awakening, but they do it in a way that they are disjoined from the frames of reference on which those establishings are based. This includes the framework of dhammas:

> "Monks, even those who are arahants—whose effluents are ended, who have reached fulfillment, done the task, laid down the burden,

> attained the true goal, totally destroyed the fetter of becoming, and who are released through right gnosis—even they remain focused on dhammas in and of themselves—being ardent, alert, unified, clear-minded, concentrated, and single-minded, disjoined from dhammas."

Because "dhammas" here includes not only the five clinging-aggregates, but also the four noble truths—and thus the fourth truth, the path, and the factor of right view within the path—arahants experience right view disjoined from it, just as they are disjoined from all of the six sense media and their objects (MN 140).

The prose section of AN 4:24 contains this interesting passage:

> "Whatever in this world—with its devas, Māras and Brahmās, its generations with their contemplatives and brahmans, rulers and common people—is seen, heard, sensed, cognized, attained, sought after, pondered by the intellect: That I directly know. That has been realized by the Tathāgata, but in the Tathāgata it has not been established."

So, apart from an actual experience of full awakening, it's hard to know what the experience of being disjoined—or of a truth's not being established in one's mind—is actually like. But it's certainly not identical to the way a person on the path relates to right view, as AN 4:24 makes clear:

> "Whatever is seen or heard or sensed
> and fastened onto as true by others,
> One who is Such—among the self-fettered—
> would not further claim to be true or even false."

Even if we were to regard this passage as only be a suggestion, it still suggests some important things. One of them is that it would be foolhardy to say that, from the Canon, we can confidently infer the nature of an arahant's relationship to a right view about things true and false.

• In response to the second observation: Although it is true that SN 22:122 describes a strategic use for the perception of not-self beyond the path, it's still just a strategic use: for the purpose of a pleasant abiding in the here-and-now and for mindfulness and alertness. And as the passage clearly states, the arahant has no *need* for this contemplation. It's simply a pleasant way for an awakened person to spend the time, mindful and alert. There is

nothing in SN 22:122 to indicate that this contemplation performs any function for an arahant beyond serving that strategic purpose. And given what we have noted under the first point, it would be hard to say how far the truth of that perception goes in the eyes of someone who has seen the limitations of perception and what lies beyond perception.

• As for the third observation: Not all the Canon's statements about the limitations of language in describing the arahant's relationship toward right view are contained in the poems. Some prose passages speak of these limitations as well. For instance, a prose discourse, SN 48:4, clearly states that the arahant has realized the escape from discernment, which is equivalent to right view. The passages in SN 12:15, DN 15, and AN 10:93, cited above to support this point, are in prose, as is the first half of AN 4:24, cited in the original article.

Secondly, the prose passages of the Canon never suggest that the poems recorded in the Canon are to be dismissed as "only suggestive." On the contrary, several prose passages are devoted to ferreting out the meaning of verses that they treat as particularly profound. (See, for example, SN 22:3, AN 3:32, AN 3:33, AN 4:41, and AN 6:61.) In AN 4:231, the Buddha distinguishes among four kinds of poets, one of them being the meaning-poet. Although he doesn't define any of the four, the implication is that he himself was a meaning-poet, one whose verses had meaning and were not to be dismissed, in the words of AN 2:46, as being merely "elegant in sound and elegant in rhetoric." Given that the Buddha and the compilers of the Canon took their poetry seriously, it's an act of scholarly arrogance for modern interpreters to dismiss that poetry simply because its message lies outside the categories of our own thought and language. This is especially true in the case of a teaching, like the Buddha's, whose whole point lies beyond the boundaries of description.

One of the important lessons of the Aṭṭhaka Vagga, a chapter in the Sutta Nipāta devoted to the theme of not-clinging, is that language is slippery. Even though it has a strategic purpose—in the Buddha's case, to convey lessons of the Dhamma—it falls short of the highest dhammas, and even further short of the ending of dhammas, unbinding (AN 10:58).

This is why—when dealing with all lessons of the Dhamma, including the lessons of not-self—it's important to view the language of perceptions and thought-fabrications as performative and to use it strategically: to get the

mind to what lies beyond perceptions and thought-fabrications, and not to develop a scholarly fixation on perceptions and thought-fabrications as expressions of truth in and of themselves. Otherwise, we risk wasting our time trying to catch in the net of language something that no words can catch.

> Effluents ended,
> independent of nutriment,
> their pasture—emptiness
> & freedom without sign:
> their trail,
> like that of birds through space,
> can't be traced. — *Dhp 93*

The Names for Nibbāna

As a young man, the Buddha had a vision of the world: All beings were like fish in a dwindling stream, fighting one another for a last gulp of water before they all died. Everywhere he looked for happiness, he found nothing to which someone else hadn't already laid claim. The implications of this vision struck terror in his heart: Life survived by feeding on other life, physically and mentally; to be interdependent is to "inter-eat"; the suffering that results serves no larger purpose, and so is totally pointless. This was the realization that drove him from home into the wilderness, to see if there might be a happiness that wasn't dependent on conditions, that didn't die, didn't need to feed.

His awakening was the discovery that such a happiness did exist: a dimension, touched by the heart and mind, that was totally free from conditions. It wasn't the result of anything, and didn't cause anything else. The path leading to that discovery was what he taught for the rest of his life.

No single name did full justice to that dimension, so he named it largely with similes and analogies. The primary name was *nibbāna,* unbinding. This was an analogy based on the way fire was viewed at the time: Fire burns, agitated, trapped, and hot, because the fire element clings to its fuel. When it lets go of the fuel, it goes out, cool and unbound.

But the Buddha gave his discovery more than 30 other names as well, to indicate ways in which it's really worth desiring, really worth all the effort that goes into attaining it. The names fall into five main groups, conveying five different facets of that dimension:

The first is that it's not a blank-out. Instead, it's a type of consciousness. But unlike ordinary consciousness, it's not known through the six senses, and it doesn't engage in fabricating any experience at all—unlike, for example, the non-dual consciousness found in formless levels of concentration. The Buddha described this consciousness as "without surface" and "unestablished." His image for it is a beam of light that lands nowhere. Although bright in and of itself, it doesn't engage in anything, and so can't be detected by anyone else.

The second facet of this dimension is truth: Because it's outside of time,

it doesn't change, doesn't deceive you, doesn't turn into anything else. This is why the Buddha called it undeceptive, unwavering, permanence, ageless, undecaying, and deathless.

The third is freedom: free from hunger, free from suffering and the causes of suffering, free from location, free from restrictions of any kind. In addition to "unbinding," the names indicating this freedom include: release, the effluent-free, attachment-free, free from longing, non-objectification, the ending of craving, dispassion, purity

The fourth is bliss: a happiness unadulterated and harmless. The names following from this facet are: peace, rest, the secure, security, island, shelter, harbor, refuge.

The fifth facet is excellence, higher than anything known in even the highest heavens. In the Buddha's words, it's amazing, astounding, ultimate, beyond.

Even though this dimension is uncaused, a path of practice leads to it—in the same way that a road to a mountain doesn't cause the mountain, but following the road can get you there. The road is one thing; the mountain, something else. Following the road involves fostering, among other things, generosity, virtue, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. Through these qualities, we develop the wisdom and compassion to see that nirvana really is the wisest and most compassionate goal we can set for ourselves: wise in that, unlike other goals, it's more than worth the effort required, and will never disappoint; compassionate in that we not only remove our mouth from the feeding frenzy of interdependence, but we also show others who are disheartened by the pointlessness of suffering that there is a way out.

It's for the sake of this goal that we meditate.

Glossary

Ajaan (Thai): Teacher; mentor. Pāli form: *Ācariya.*

Arahant: A "worthy one" or "pure one;" a person whose mind is free of defilement and thus is not destined for further rebirth. A title for the Buddha and the highest level of his noble disciples. Sanskrit form: *Arhat.*

Bhikkhu: Monk.

Bhikkhunī: Nun.

Brahmā: A deva inhabiting the realms of form or formlessness.

Brahman: A member of the priestly caste, which claimed to be the highest caste in India, based on birth. In a specifically Buddhist usage, "brahman" can also mean an arahant, conveying the point that excellence is based not on birth or race, but on the qualities attained in the mind.

Deva: Literally, "shining one." An inhabitant of the terrestrial and celestial realms higher than the human.

Dhamma: (1) Event; action; (2) a phenomenon in and of itself; (3) mental quality; (4) doctrine, teaching; (5) nibbāna (although there are passages describing nibbāna as the abandoning of all dhammas). When capitalized in this book, Dhamma means teaching. Sanskrit form: *Dharma.*

Gandhabba: A deva on one of the lower celestial levels, often portrayed as a trickster.

Jhāna: Mental absorption. A state of strong concentration, devoid of sensuality or unskillful thoughts, focused on a single physical sensation or mental notion which is then expanded to fill the whole range of one's awareness. Jhāna is synonymous with right concentration, the eighth factor in the noble eightfold path. Sanskrit form: *Dhyāna.*

Kamma: Intentional act. Sanskrit form: *Karma.*

Māra: The personification of temptation and all forces, within and without, that create obstacles to release from *saṁsāra.*

Nibbāna: Literally, the "unbinding" of the mind from passion, aversion, and delusion, and from the entire round of death and rebirth. As this term also denotes the extinguishing of a fire, it carries connotations of stilling, cooling, and peace. "Total nibbāna" in some contexts denotes the experience

of Awakening; in others, the final passing away of an arahant. Sanskrit form: *Nirvāṇa.*

Pāli: The language of the oldest extant complete Canon of the Buddha's teachings.

Pāṭimokkha: The basic code of rules for monks and nuns. The monks' code contains 227 rules; the nuns', 311.

Saṁsāra: Transmigration; the process of wandering through repeated states of becoming, entailing repeated birth and death.

Saṁvega: A sense of overwhelming terror or dismay over the pointlessness of life as it is normally lived.

Saṅgha: On the conventional *(sammati)* level, this term denotes the communities of Buddhist monks and nuns. On the noble or ideal *(ariya)* level, it denotes those followers of the Buddha, lay or ordained, who have attained at least stream-entry.

Satipaṭṭhāna: Establishing of mindfulness; foundation of mindfulness. The meditative practice of focusing on a particular frame of reference—the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, mind states in an of themselves, or mental qualities in an of themselves—ardent, alert, and mindfulness, putting aside greed and distress in reference to the world. This practice then forms the basis for *jhāna.*

Sutta: Discourse. Sanskrit form: *Sūtra.*

Tathāgata: Literally, "one who has become authentic *(tatha-āgata),"* or "one who is really gone *(tatha-gata),"* an epithet used in ancient India for a person who has attained the highest religious goal. In the Pali Canon, this usually denotes the Buddha, although occasionally it also denotes any of his arahant disciples.

Uposatha: Observance day, coinciding with the full moon, new moon, and half moons. Lay Buddhists often observe the eight precepts on this day. "Uposatha" also refers to the ceremony in which monks meet to listen to the recitation of the Pāṭimokkha on the full moon and new moon uposathas.

Vinaya: The monastic discipline, whose rules and traditions comprise six volumes in printed text.

Vipassanā: Insight. In the Pāli Canon, this denotes a quality of the mind. In modern Buddhism, it also denotes a type of meditation practice specifically aimed at developing insight.

Abbreviations

AN	*Aṅguttara Nikāya*
Cv	*Cullavagga*
Dhp	*Dhammapada*
DN	*Dīgha Nikāya*
Iti	*Itivuttaka*
MN	*Majjhima Nikāya*
Mv	*Mahāvagga*
SN	*Saṁyutta Nikāya*
Sn	*Sutta Nipāta*
Ud	*Udāna*

References to DN, Iti, and MN are to discourse (sutta); references to Dhp, to verse. References to Mv and Cv are to chapter, section, and sub-section. References to other texts are to section (nipāta, saṁyutta, or vagga) and discourse.

Table of Contents